Congressional Research Service
Informing the legislative debate since 1914

Global Trends in Democracy: Background, U.S. Policy, and Issues for Congress

Updated October 17, 2018

Congressional Research Service
https://crsreports.congress.gov
R45344

CRS REPORT
Prepared for Members and
Committees of Congress

Congressional Research Service
Informing the legislative debate since 1914

SUMMARY

R45344

October 17, 2018

Michael A. Weber
Analyst in Foreign Affairs

Global Trends in Democracy: Background, U.S. Policy, and Issues for Congress

Widespread concerns exist among analysts and policymakers over the current trajectory of democracy around the world. Congress has often played an important role in supporting and institutionalizing U.S. democracy promotion, and current developments may have implications for U.S. policy, which for decades has broadly reflected the view that the spread of democracy around the world is favorable to U.S. interests.

The aggregate level of democracy around the world has not advanced for more than a decade. Analysis of data trend-lines from two major global democracy indexes indicates that, as of 2017, the level of democracy around the world has not advanced since around the year 2005 or 2006. Although the degree of democratic backsliding around the world has arguably been modest overall to this point, some elements of democracy, particularly those associated with liberal democracy, have receded during this period. Declines in democracy that have occurred may have disproportionately affected countries with larger population sizes. Overall, this data indicates that democracy's expansion has been more challenged during this period than during any similar period dating back to the 1970s. Despite this, democratic declines to this point have been considerably less severe than the more pronounced setbacks that occurred during some earlier periods in the 20th century.

Numerous broad factors may be affecting democracy globally. These include (but are not limited to) the following:

- *The growing international influence of nondemocratic governments*. These countries may in some instances view containing the spread of democracy as instrumental toward other goals or as helpful to their own domestic regime stability. Thus they may be engaging in various activities that have negative impacts on democracy internationally. At the same time, relatively limited evidence exists to date of a more affirmative agenda to promote authoritarian political systems or norms as competing alternatives to democracy.
- *The state of democracy's global appeal as a political system*. Challenges to and apparent dissatisfaction with government performance within democracies, and the concomitant emergence of economically successful authoritarian capitalist states, may be affecting in particular democracy's traditional instrumental appeal as the political system most capable of delivering economic growth and national prestige. Public opinion polling data indicate that democracy as a political system may overall still retain considerable appeal around the world relative to nondemocratic alternatives.
- *Nondemocratic governments' use of new methods to repress political dissent within their own societies.* Tools such as regulatory restrictions on civil society and technology-enhanced censorship and surveillance are arguably enhancing the long-term durability of nondemocratic forms of governance.
- *Structural conditions in nondemocracies.* Some scholars argue that broad conditions in many of the world's remaining nondemocracies, such as their level of wealth or economic inequality, are not conducive to sustained democratization. The importance of these factors to democratization is complex and contested among experts.

Democracy promotion is a longstanding, but contested, element of U.S. foreign policy. Wide disagreements and well-worn policy debates persist among experts over whether, or to what extent, the United States should prioritize democracy promotion in its foreign policy. Many of these debates concern the relevance of democracy promotion to U.S. interests, its potential tension with other foreign policy objectives, and the United States' capacity to effectively promote democratization.

Recent developments pose numerous potential policy considerations and questions for Congress. Democracy promotion has arguably not featured prominently in the Trump Administration's foreign policy to this point, creating potential continued areas of disagreement between some Members of Congress and the Administration. Simultaneously, current challenges around the world present numerous questions of potential consideration for Congress. Broadly, these include whether and where the United States should place greater or lesser emphasis on democracy promotion in its foreign policy, as well as various related questions concerning the potential tools for promoting democracy.

Contents

Introduction 1
Background 2
Varying Definitions of Democracy 2
Democracy Promotion, Congress, and U.S. Policy 3
Identification with U.S. Strategy and Interests 4
Global Trends 6
Measures of the State of Democracy Around the World 6
Freedom House's *Freedom in the World* Report 6
The Economist Intelligence Unit's *Democracy Index* 9
Interpreting the Declines 13
Factors Potentially Affecting Democracy Globally 15
Geopolitics and Authoritarian Power 15
Challenges to Democracy's Global Appeal as a Political System 21
Modern Methods of Political Control 25
Structural Conditions 30
Debates over Democracy Promotion in U.S. Foreign Policy 31
Relationship to U.S. Interests 32
Potential Tension with Other U.S. Policy Objectives 33
Capacity and Effectiveness 34
Issues for Congress 35
How does the Trump Administration view democracy promotion? 35
How much emphasis should the United States place on democracy promotion? 36
What tools exist for targeted U.S. foreign policy responses to particular challenges? 37
How much funding should be provided for democracy promotion programs? 38
How can democracy programs be meaningfully evaluated and/or usefully targeted? 38
Should the United States work to form new international initiatives to defend democracy? 40
Outlook 41

Figures

Figure 1. *Freedom in the World's* Political Rights and Civil Liberties Ratings Since 1972 7
Figure 2. *Freedom in the World's* Political Rights Changes by Subcategory, 2005 vs. 2017 8
Figure 3. *Freedom in the World's* Civil Liberties Changes by Subcategory, 2005 vs. 2017 9
Figure 4. *Democracy Index* Global Average Since 2006 10
Figure 5. *Democracy Index* Changes by Category, 2006 vs. 2017 12
Figure 6. Level of Support for Democracy Versus Nondemocratic Alternatives 24
Figure 7. Geographic Distribution of Initiatives to Restrict Civil Society 28

Tables

Table 1. *Freedom in the World* Global Country Statuses, 2005 vs. 2017 8

Table 2. *Democracy Index* Global Regime Types, 2006 vs. 2017 11

Appendixes

Appendix A. Background Information on Democracy Indexes 42
Appendix B. Selected CRS Reports 45

Contacts

Author Information 46

Introduction

For decades U.S. policymakers have connected U.S. national security and other core interests with the spread of democracy around the world. Reflecting this, the promotion of democracy has been a longstanding and multifaceted element of U.S. foreign policy, and one often interrelated with U.S. efforts to promote human rights. Congress has often played an important role in supporting and institutionalizing U.S. democracy promotion by passing key legislation, appropriating funds for foreign assistance programs and other democracy promoting activities, and conducting oversight of aspects of U.S. foreign policy relevant to democracy promotion.

Widespread concerns exist among analysts and policymakers over the current trajectory of democracy around the world and multiple hearings in the 115th Congress reflected bipartisan concern over this issue.[1] For the past decade, experts have debated whether, and to what extent, the heretofore global expansion of democracy has halted or even begun to reverse. Many argue that the world has been in the midst of what has been termed a global "democratic recession" that began around 2006.[2] Proponents of this view cite data from global measures of democracy as well as qualitative trends that have heightened concerns over the state of democracy, particularly in recent years. Frequently cited concerns include the rise of authoritarian populist and nationalist leaders, the potential negative influence on democracy from internationally assertive authoritarian states, questions over the enduring appeal of democracy as a political system, new tools nondemocratic governments are using to stifle potential democratizing forces, and others.

Experts vary in their assessment of the impact of these and other perceived trends and in their appraisal of what current conditions may portend for the future trajectory of democracy around the world. With regard to U.S. policy, there are disagreements over the extent to which the United States should respond to negative trends, as well as over the U.S. capacity to influence them meaningfully and effectively.

This report aims to provide Congress information, analysis, and a variety of perspectives on these issues. In particular, it provides brief conceptual background on democracy and on democracy promotion's historical role in U.S. policy, analyzes aggregate trends in the global level of democracy using data from two major democracy indexes, and discusses some of the key factors that may be broadly affecting democracy around the world. Finally, the report includes a synthesis of debates over democracy promotion in U.S. foreign policy and a selection of related policy issues and questions for Congress in the current period and beyond.

[1] U.S. Congress, House Foreign Affairs Committee, *Democracy Promotion in a Challenging World,* hearings, 115th Congress, 2nd sess., June 14, 2018; U.S. Congress, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Transnational Crime, Civilian Security, Democracy, Human Rights, and Global Women's Issues, *Democracy and Human Rights: The Case for U.S. Leadership*, hearings, 115th Congress, 1st sess., February 16, 2017.

[2] Larry Diamond, "Facing up to the Democratic Recession," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 26, no. 1 (January 2015), pp. 141-155.

Background

Varying Definitions of Democracy

In the most basic sense, democracy means "rule by the people."[3] Attempts to elaborate on this definition in ways useful to policymakers and political scientists are longstanding and contested.[4] Conceptions of democracy may vary across cultural contexts and across time, and ideological biases (conscious or otherwise) as well as the broader "political zeitgeist" of the times may play a significant role in influencing what features are considered essential to the definition of democracy.[5]

While competing conceptions of democracy vary in numerous ways, many can be differentiated by their relative "thickness" or "thinness." Relatively "thin" definitions generally emphasize minimum elements of electoral political competition and participation, such as free and fair elections, universal suffrage, and the right to join political organizations.[6] More expansive "thick" definitions may include these minimum elements as well as broad protections for individual rights and civil liberties (and corresponding constraints on government power and majority rule), the rule of law, well-functioning and transparent government institutions, and/or a democratic political culture, among other elements.[7] These more expansive definitions reflect the notion that democracy consists of more than just basic elements of democratic political competition, such as elections, a contention that is now generally accepted even as the outer boundaries of the concept of democracy remain unsettled.[8] Thus while minimalist, "thin" definitions may suffer criticism for excluding elements that are thought by many to be essential to democracy, broader "thick" definitions may conversely be criticized for including elements that to some are beyond the bounds of its core conception.[9]

Various adjectives are also frequently employed to denote different conceptions or levels of democracy. The term *electoral democracy*, for instance, is typically understood to align with more minimalist conceptions of democracy, while *liberal democracy* refers to those minimalist elements plus elements found in more expansive definitions.[10] As well, while democracy is

[3] The term *democracy* derives from the Greek words *demos*, "the people," and *craits*, "to rule."

[4] The academic literature includes oft-repeated variations of the phrase, "there are as many definitions of democracy as there are users of the concept."

[5] Seva Gunitsky, "Lost in the gray zone: competing measures of democracy in the former Soviet republics," in *Ranking the World: Grading States as a Tool of Global Governance* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 113-150.

[6] Robert Dahl's conception of *polyarchy* is sometimes cited as an influential example of a somewhat minimalist theory of the institutions necessary for democracy. As he defined it in 1989, polyarchy includes seven elements: control over government decisions by elected officials, free and fair elections, inclusive suffrage (virtually all adults have the right to vote), the right to run for office, freedom of expression, access to alternative sources of information, and the right to form "relatively independent" organizations, including political parties and interest groups. Dahl argued that the existence of these institutions is necessary, but not necessarily sufficient, for the functioning of democracy at the scale of modern nation states. See Robert A. Dahl, *Democracy and its Critics* (Yale University, 1989), pp. 221-224.

[7] It should be noted that the meanings of many of these concepts are themselves contested.

[8] Laurence Whitehead, *Democratization: Theory and Experience* (Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 14.

[9] See Michael Coppedge et al., "Conceptualizing and Measuring Democracy: A New Approach" *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 9, no. 2 (June 2011), pp. 247-267; Seva Gunitsky, "Lost in the gray zone: competing measures of democracy in the former Soviet republics," in *Ranking the World: Grading States as a Tool of Global Governance* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 113-150.

[10] There are various other common descriptive terms for conceptions of democracy that emphasize differing principles, such as participatory democracy, egalitarian democracy, and others.

frequently understood in contrast to *authoritarianism* or *dictatorship*, many modern definitions and measures recognize that political systems often exist in middle zones, and are therefore referred to using concepts such as *hybrid regimes*.[11] Attempts to identify political systems on a continuum of a broader spectrum of concepts in this way may nonetheless require the use of relatively arbitrary divisions between these concepts, given that, as one scholar has argued, "democracy is in many ways a continuous variable," as are many of its key elements.[12]

The concept of democracy is not explicitly defined in U.S. policy or law. Nonetheless, U.S. law generally implicitly aligns with nonminimalist views or notions of democracy. For example, the ADVANCE Democracy Act of 2007 (Title XXI of P.L. 110-53) associated democratic countries with eight characteristics, including some elements found in broader, "thick" definitions of democracy, such as the rule of law and various civil liberties.[13] Similarly, the scope of democracy promotion programs as defined in appropriations bills includes elements such as the rule of law and labor rights.[14] In line with this, unless otherwise noted, the term democracy in this report refers to broader conceptions of democracy typically associated with the term *liberal democracy*.

Democracy Promotion, Congress, and U.S. Policy

Encouraging the spread of democracy is a recurrent theme in U.S. foreign policy, though one that has been embraced unevenly given competing objectives and the differing foreign policy priorities and perspectives of presidential administrations. Congress has often advocated on a bipartisan basis for ensuring that support for democracy and human rights is an important component of U.S. policy, and has repeatedly taken legislative action to that effect. Beginning in the 1970s, in particular, Congress passed legislation to institutionalize support for democracy and human rights within the State Department, authorized and appropriated significant resources for democracy promotion programs (more than $2 billion annually in recent years), and sought to restrict aid to governments and to security forces responsible for gross human rights violations, among other measures.

The means by which the United States promotes democracy, broadly defined, include bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, sanctions and other forms of conditionality, foreign assistance programs, educational and cultural exchange programs, and public diplomacy and international broadcasting.[15] U.S. democracy promotion also sometimes has been associated with military intervention.[16] Many democracy promotion experts today draw a distinction between peaceful

[11] For example, the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index assigns countries to four different categories: "full democracies," "flawed democracies," "hybrid regimes," and "authoritarian regimes."

[12] Larry Diamond, "Facing up to the Democratic Recession," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 26, no. 1 (January 2015), pp. 141-155. Continuous variables describe those that can take on any value within a certain range, in contrast with discrete variables such as the above-mentioned categories of "democracy," "hybrid regime," or "authoritarian regime." Debate exists over the relative merits of using continuous measures of democracy versus discrete categories.

[13] See 22 U.S.C. 8203.

[14] See, for instance, Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2018 (Division K of P.L. 115-141).

[15] For summary information of some of these efforts in recent years, see the State Department's "Advancing Freedom and Democracy" reports, issued pursuant to the ADVANCE Democracy Act of 2007 (Title XXI of P.L. 110-53), which describe "efforts by the U.S. Government to support democracy and human rights in nondemocratic countries and countries undergoing democratic transitions worldwide." Reports are accessible at https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/afdr/index.htm.

[16] U.S. and allied efforts in post-World War II Japan and Germany may represent rare instances in which democracy was successfully instituted by external actors. Many other examples, including recent efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq, have faced widespread challenges and criticism. For example, see Stephen M. Walt, "Why is America so Bad at

democracy support and democracy imposition, with military force falling into the latter category.[17]

The traditional rhetorical and official policy embrace of democracy promotion by U.S. policymakers (see discussion below) has not always been reflected in U.S. foreign policy activities.[18] For more information on the history of U.S. democracy promotion and congressional efforts in this area, particularly relating to foreign assistance programs, see CRS Report R44858, *Democracy Promotion: An Objective of U.S. Foreign Assistance*, by Marian L. Lawson and Susan B. Epstein.

Identification with U.S. Strategy and Interests

For over a century, U.S. policymakers have emphasized to varying degrees a connection between the state of democracy in the world and U.S. foreign policy and national security interests. An overarching theme in drawing this connection has been a perceived relationship between peace and world order and the existence of partnerships between democracies with shared values. In one of the early articulations of this sentiment, President Woodrow Wilson in 1917 advocated for U.S. entry into World War I in part by arguing that "a steadfast concert for peace can never be maintained except by a partnership of democratic nations."[19]

Particularly since World War II, U.S. belief in democratic peace and stability has arguably led to democracy promotion's inclusion in a broader, though not comprehensively articulated, U.S. "grand strategy" alongside other elements such as the promotion of free trade and the creation of new international institutions.[20] The efforts of the United States and its allies to construct what some refer to as the post-World War II international order were, in the words of a recent report by the RAND Corporation, "based, in part, on the assumption that no order would be sustainable if not built on a foundation of democracies with shared values," with democracy regarded "as the foundation of other core elements of the order, particularly economic growth and sustainable peace."[21] International relations scholars and policymakers debate, however, the conception and historical importance of the international order within U.S. strategy and as a perceived instrument for peace and stability.[22] More broadly, debates continue over whether and to what extent

---

Promoting Democracy in Other Countries?" Foreign Policy, April 25, 2016.

[17] See Adrian A. Basora and Kenneth Yalowitz, "Introduction," in *Does Democracy Matter? The United States and Global Democracy Support*, ed. Adrian A. Basora, Agnieszka Marczyk, and Maia Otarashvili (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), pp. xv-xvi.

[18] During the Cold War, for instance, spreading democracy was an arguably major component of U.S. foreign policy but one that was often subordinated to an overriding goal of preventing the spread of Communism. In the early years of the Cold War, for instance, the United States supported the overthrow of democratically elected governments in Iran and Guatemala.

[19] Wilson also famously stated in the same address that "the world must be made safe for democracy." GPO, "Address of the President of the United States," 65th Congress, 1st Session, April 2, 1917.

[20] G. John Ikenberry, "Why Export Democracy?" *The Wilson Quarterly*, vol. 23, No. 2 (Spring 1999), pp. 56-65.

[21] Michael J. Mazarr et al., *Understanding the Current International Order*, RAND Corporation, 2016. The report categorizes the elements of this order as economic (with components such as the World Trade Organization and development institutions), political-military (with components such as alliances and collective security institutions), and justice and problem-solving (with components such as human rights norms and issue-specific functional organizations).

[22] For examples of contrasting views, see Graham Allison, "The Myth of the Liberal Order," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2018, and G. John Ikenberry, "Liberal World," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2018. See additional discussion and citations in the "Debates over Democracy Promotion in U.S. Foreign Policy" section. Also, for more information on the international order and the U.S. role in this order, see CRS Report R44891, *U.S. Role in the World:*

democracy promotion should be part of U.S. foreign policy. (See "Debates over Democracy Promotion in U.S. Foreign Policy.")

Recent Presidential Administration Policies

Recent presidential administrations of both parties have emphasized the view that democracies are more responsible international stakeholders and are more peaceful toward one another. President Bill Clinton's 1996 National Security Strategy (NSS) document, for instance, stated that "democratic states are less likely to threaten our interests and more likely to cooperate with the United States to meet security threats and promote free trade and sustainable development."[23] President George W. Bush's 2006 NSS stated, "Because democracies are the most responsible members of the international system, promoting democracy is the most effective long-term measure for strengthening international stability; reducing regional conflicts; countering terrorism and terror-supporting extremism; and extending peace and prosperity."[24] The Barack Obama Administration NSS documents included more general language connecting democracy promotion and U.S. interests. The 2010 NSS stated, for example, that "America's commitment to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law are essential sources of our strength and influence in the world," and that "our long-term security and prosperity depends on our steady support for universal values, which sets us apart from our enemies, adversarial governments, and many potential competitors for influence."[25]

All three Presidents argued for promoting democracy at times by directly invoking the logic of what has been called the *democratic peace theory*, or the contention that democracies are less likely to engage in armed conflict with other democracies.[26] The historical relative lack of war between democracies is widely recognized by scholars, though they have debated the causes of this phenomenon and its significance.[27]

Trump Administration Policy

Unlike the NSS documents of previous administrations, the Trump Administration's December 2017 NSS does not articulate a general intention for the United States to actively promote democracy. The NSS does, however, include references to promoting related elements such as improved governance, anticorruption, and the rule of law, and states that the United States, "will continue to champion American values and offer encouragement to those struggling for human dignity in their societies." It also describes the United States as engaged in "political contests between those who favor repressive systems and those who favor free societies." Echoing to

---

Background and Issues for Congress, by Ronald O'Rourke and Michael Moodie.

[23] The White House, "A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement," February 1996. As discussed in the "Issues for Congress" section, the empirical evidence for this theory is contested among scholars.

[24] The White House, "The National Security Strategy of the United States of America," March 2006.

[25] The White House, "National Security Strategy," May 2010.

[26] Clinton's 1996 NSS (cited above) states that "democracies … are far less likely to wage war on one another." President Bush in 2004 stated that "the reason why I'm so strong on democracy is democracies don't go to war with each other. And the reason why is the people of most societies don't like war, and they understand what war means." See The White House, "President and Prime Minister Blair Discussed Iraq, Middle East," November 12, 2004. President Obama in 2009 stated, "Only a just peace based on the inherent rights and dignity of every individual can truly be lasting … peace is unstable where citizens are denied the right to … choose their own leaders or assemble without fear…. America has never fought a war against a democracy, and our closest friends are governments that protect the rights of their citizens." See Barack H. Obama, "Nobel Lecture," December 10, 2009.

[27] See the "Debates over Democracy Promotion in U.S. Foreign Policy" section for discussion of these debates.

some degree the arguments from previous administrations, it states that "governments that respect the rights of their citizens remain the best vehicle for prosperity, human happiness, and peace," and conversely that "governments that routinely abuse the rights of their citizens do not play constructive roles in the world."[28] Many argue that the Trump Administration has deemphasized democracy promotion relative to other foreign policy priorities, an issue that is discussed in the "Issues for Congress" section.

Global Trends

Measures of the State of Democracy Around the World

Numerous global indexes attempt to measure respect for democracy-related factors in nearly every country. The following discussion analyzes trends as measured by two of the most frequently cited annual indexes: Freedom House's *Freedom in the World* report and the Economist Intelligence Unit's *Democracy Index*.[29] Examining the trajectory of democracy as measured by these indexes may help quantify and characterize perceived global democratic declines as well as help place them in broader historical context. Background information about the methodology of each report, information on other global indexes not analyzed in this report, and discussion of some of the general critiques of democracy indexes can be found in **Appendix A**.[30]

Freedom House's *Freedom in the World* Report

Freedom House's *Freedom in the World* country ratings are often used as a proxy measure for the level of democracy. They may correspond with relatively "thick" definitions of democracy in that they include protections for various civil liberties, the rule of law, safeguards against corruption, and other elements associated with nonminimalist definitions.[31]

Historical Trends

According to Freedom House's time series data, respect for political rights and civil liberties around the globe has increased substantially since the mid-1970s. Since the release of Freedom House's first report covering 1972, the combined average of global political rights and civil liberties was at its lowest point in 1975.[32] By 2005, this combined measure had increased by 50% (according to CRS calculations) and stood at the highest point yet recorded.[33] (See **Figure 1** below.) Similarly, the percentage of countries categorized as "free" by Freedom House (as

[28] The White House, "National Security Strategy of the United States of America," December 2017.

[29] Research Assistant Jennifer Roscoe provided data assistance for the below sections.

[30] The U.S. government does not itself publish reports that comprehensively assess the state of democracy around the world, but the State Department does produce related reports on international human rights and religious freedom issues. See CRS In Focus IF10795, *Global Human Rights: The Department of State's Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*, by Michael A. Weber, and CRS In Focus IF10803, *Global Human Rights: International Religious Freedom Policy*, by Michael A. Weber.

[31] Freedom House has also used a more minimalist measurement to designate countries as "electoral democracies" if they achieve certain minimum standards in the political rights category. In the report covering 2017, a civil liberties threshold was added to this categorization.

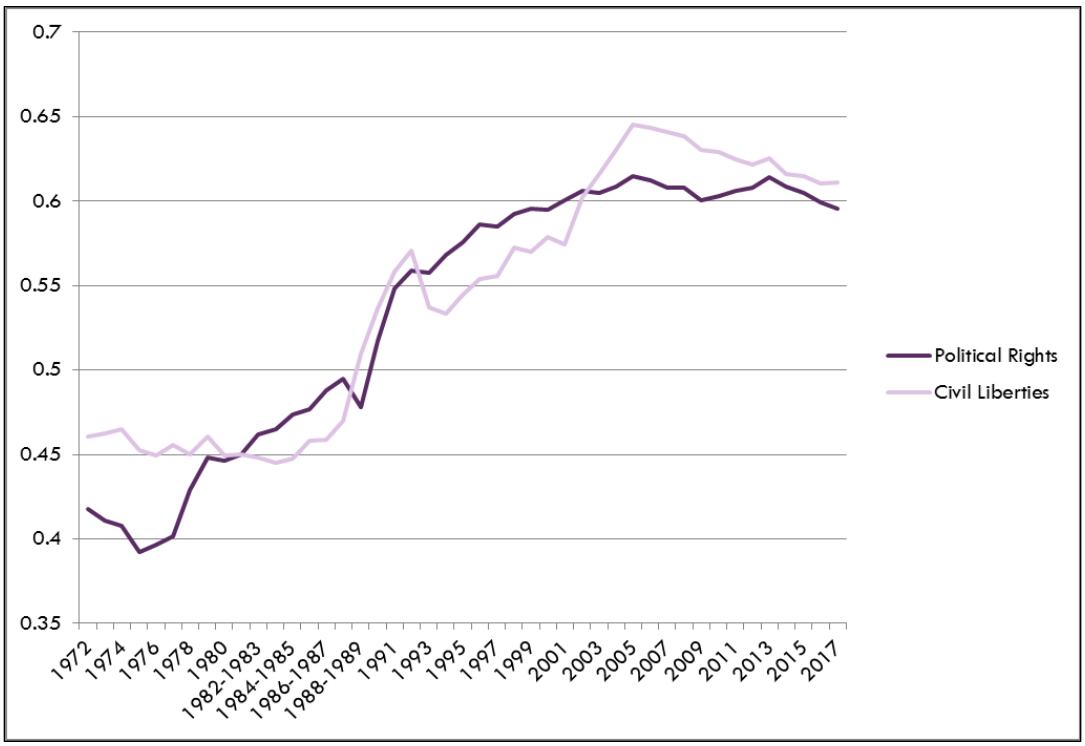
[32] At .42 (on a 0-1 scale). This number is a combined average of political rights and civil liberties, with higher numbers representing greater levels of freedom (as calculated by CRS).

[33] At .63 (on a 0-1 scale). This number is a combined average of political rights and civil liberties, with higher numbers representing greater levels of freedom (as calculated by CRS).

determined by their combined average of political rights and civil liberties) peaked in 2006 and 2007 at 46.63%.

Figure 1. *Freedom in the World's* Political Rights and Civil Liberties Ratings Since 1972

Global Averages, 1972-2017



Notes: CRS calculated the yearly global average for each rating and normalized it to a 0 to 1 scale. Although Freedom House's ratings are such that lower numbers correspond with higher levels of freedom, for a more intuitive display, CRS reversed the data so that higher numbers correspond with higher levels of freedom.

From 2005 to 2017, Freedom House has recorded an overall global decline in ratings for both civil liberties and political rights, with civil liberties having declined by a greater degree (but from a higher base). According to CRS calculations, the combined global average rating of political rights and civil liberties in the Freedom House index decreased by approximately 3.2% from 2005 to 2017.[34] In terms of freedom gains and declines on a per-country basis, Freedom House data show that countries that have gained have been outnumbered by those that have declined every year since 2006, and the gap between these figures has grown wider since 2015. In 2017, 35 countries gained while more than double that (71) declined.[35]

Table 1 below compares Freedom House's country statuses for the report covering 2005, with the most recent report covering 2017. As illustrated in the table, the number and percentage of countries categorized as "not free" increased in this period. In population terms, according to Freedom House, 53% of the world's population lived in either a "not free" or "partly free" country in 2005, a figure that increased to 61% in 2017.

[34] From .63 in 2005 to .61 in 2017 (on a 0 to 1 scale).

[35] Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2018*. In 2015, 72 countries declined while 43 improved (a gap of 29 countries); in 2016, the figures were 67 versus 35 (a gap of 32 countries), and in 2017 they were 71 versus 35 (a gap of 36 countries).

Table 1. *Freedom in the World* Global Country Statuses, 2005 vs. 2017

	Number of Countries (% of countries)		Percentage of World Population	
Status	**2005**	**2017**	**2005**	**2017**
Free	**89 (46%)**	**88 (45%)**	**46%**	**39%**
Partly Free	**58 (30%)**	**58 (30%)**	**18%**	**24%**
Not Free	**45 (24%)**	**49 (37%)**	**35%**	**37%**

Source: Freedom House, "Country Status Distribution Freedom in the World 1973-2018," Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2006*; Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2018*.

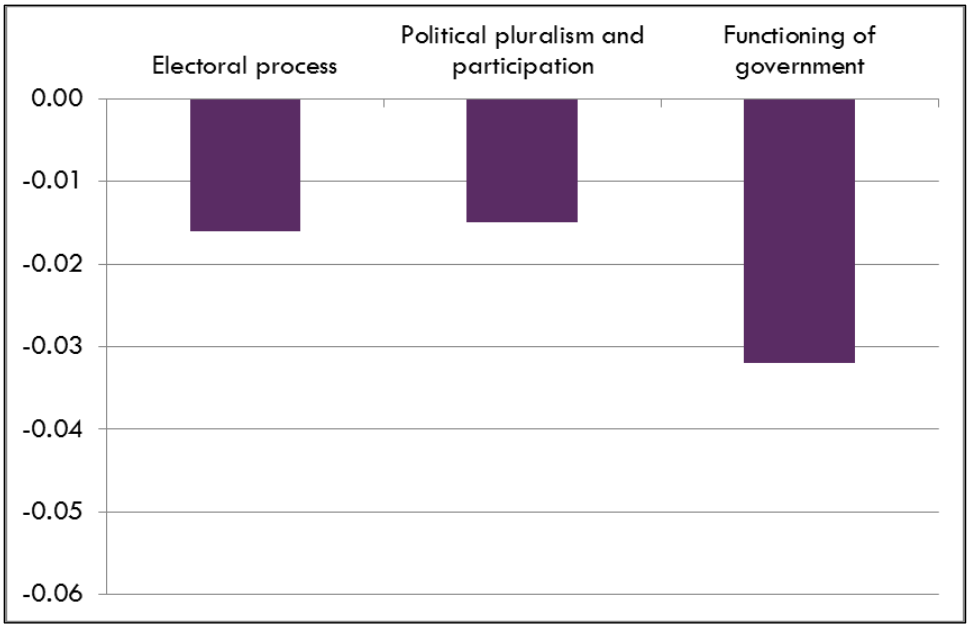
Notes: The 2005 report measured 192 countries, while the 2017 report measured 195 countries; the 2005 report covered a slightly different timeline than the calendar year: December 1, 2004, to November 30, 2005; population percentages are as reported by Freedom House.

Trends by Subcategory

The discussion below breaks down the average global score for both political rights and civil liberties by their subcategories, as measured by Freedom House. As illustrated by **Figure 2** and **Figure 3**, the average global score for every subcategory was lower in 2017 than it was in 2005; however, the size of these declines varied. In general, civil liberties subcategories showed greater decreases, with comparatively smaller declines in political rights subcategories.

Figure 2. *Freedom in the World's* Political Rights Changes by Subcategory, 2005 vs. 2017

Change in Global Averages in 2017 as compared to 2005



Source: Freedom House, "Aggregate Category and Subcategory Scores, 2003-2018."

Notes: The vertical axis represents the change in each category normalized to a 0 to 1 scale. Figures are calculated by CRS.

As shown above, within the political rights category, the "functioning of government" subcategory suffered the largest decline. This subcategory includes indicators relating to the

extent to which freely elected officials exercise power (as opposed to nonelected actors or nonstate groups), whether there are effective safeguards against official corruption, and the extent of government transparency. The "electoral process" and "political pluralism and participation" categories, which declined more modestly, focus on the constituent components of fair elections and free political competition, including universal suffrage, fair election laws and procedures, freedom to join political parties, and other elements.

Figure 3. *Freedom in the World's* Civil Liberties Changes by Subcategory, 2005 vs. 2017

Change in Global Averages in 2017 as compared to 2005

Source: Freedom House, "Aggregate Category and Subcategory Scores, 2003-2018."

Notes: The vertical axis represents the change in each category normalized to a 0 to 1 scale. Figures are calculated by CRS.

As shown by **Figure 3** above, with the exception of the "personal autonomy and individual rights" subcategory, there were larger declines in each of the civil liberties subcategories than there were in any of the political rights subcategories discussed above. This "personal autonomy and individual rights" subcategory includes indicators relating to freedom of movement, property rights, social freedoms, and equality of economic opportunity.

The "freedom of expression and belief" subcategory, which declined by the greatest degree, includes indicators on the existence of free and independent media as well as respect for religious freedom, academic freedom, and freedom of expression. The "associational and organizational rights" subcategory includes indicators relating to freedom of assembly, the free operation of nongovernmental organizations, and freedom for labor organizations. The "rule of law" subcategory includes indicators that pertain to the existence of an independent judiciary, due process, freedom from the illegitimate use of physical force (including governmental torture, war, and violent crime), and equal treatment under the law.

The Economist Intelligence Unit's *Democracy Index*

The Economist Intelligence Unit's (EIU's) *Democracy Index* is a relatively new global democracy measure, with the first released report covering the state of democracy around the world in 2006. The report indicates both an overall democracy score for each country, which is

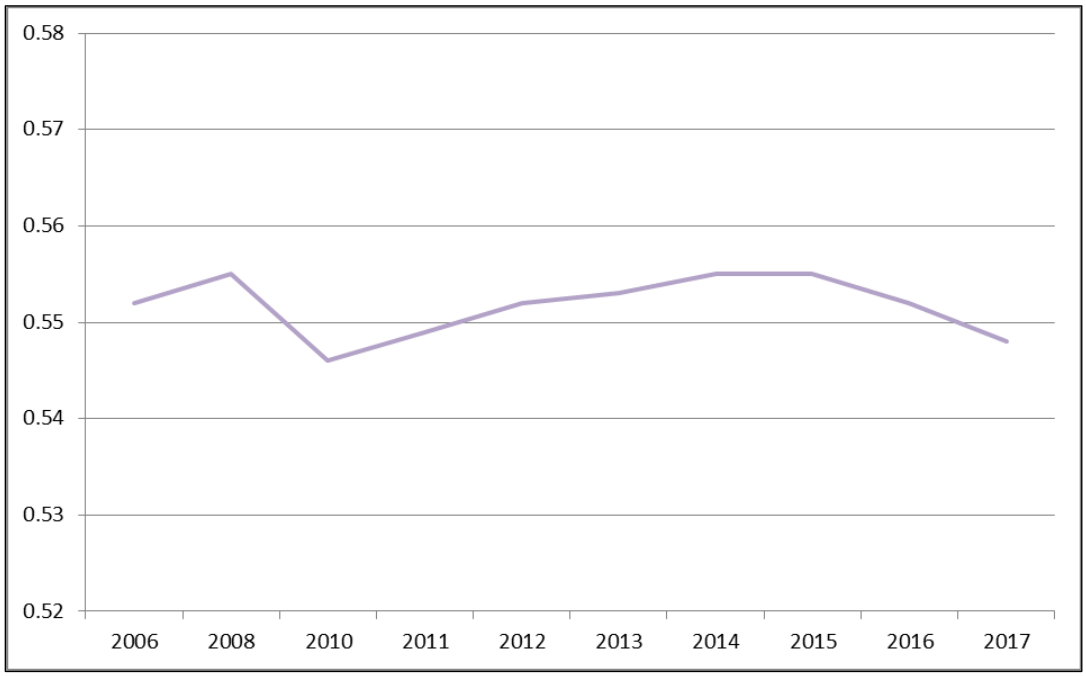
determined by aggregating scores for five related categories, as well as a corresponding regime type categorization.[36] In addition to political rights and civil liberties-related measures similar to those examined by Freedom House, EIU's index includes more emphasis on the functioning of government as well as on elements such as the level of political participation and the level of public support for democracy and democratic norms.[37]

Trends Since 2006

As illustrated by **Figure 4** below, the global level of democracy as measured by EIU was slightly lower in 2017 than in 2006, but this decline has not been consistent or uniform. According to calculations by CRS, the global average level of democracy in 2017 was less than 1% lower than it was in 2006. Although the renewed downward trend beginning in 2015 may continue, some might characterize the broader trajectory since 2006 to this point as reflecting stagnation more than outright decline. The discrepancy in overall decline in EIU's index as compared to Freedom House's may be due to improvements in measures of political participation that are included in the EIU index but not measured by Freedom House (see discussion below).

Figure 4. *Democracy Index* Global Average Since 2006

Global Average, 2006-2017



Notes: EIU's global average has been normalized on a 0 to 1 scale. For ease of viewing, the graph is zoomed in to show the range between 0.52 and 0.58 on this scale. Calculations are by CRS.

Table 2 below compares EIU's global regime type categorizations for the report covering 2006, with the most recent report covering 2017. The data indicate a decrease in the number of "full

[36] These regimes types are full democracy, flawed democracy, hybrid regime, and authoritarian regime. The EIU index tracks a slightly smaller number of countries than Freedom House's because it excludes countries with a population lower than 500,000. For more information about EIU's methodology, see **Appendix A**.

[37] The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2017: Free speech under attack*.

democracies," but also a smaller decline in the number "authoritarian regimes."[38] Accordingly, the two middle regime types, "flawed democracies" and "hybrid regimes," both increased in number and percentage.[39]

Table 2. *Democracy Index* Global Regime Types, 2006 vs. 2017

	Number of Countries (% of countries)	
Regime Types	**2006**	**2017**
Full Democracies	**26 (16%)**	**19 (11%)**
Flawed democracies	**53 (32%)**	**57 (34%)**
Hybrid regimes	**33 (20%)**	**39 (23%)**
Authoritarian regimes	**55 (33%)**	**52 (31%)**

Source: EIU Democracy Index 2006; EIU Democracy Index 2017.

Notes: EIU categorized a number of "borderline" countries in the 2006 index in a manner not strictly consistent with its own score thresholds; for consistency of comparison in the above figures, CRS recategorized countries according to a strict application of EIU's score thresholds.

Trends by Category

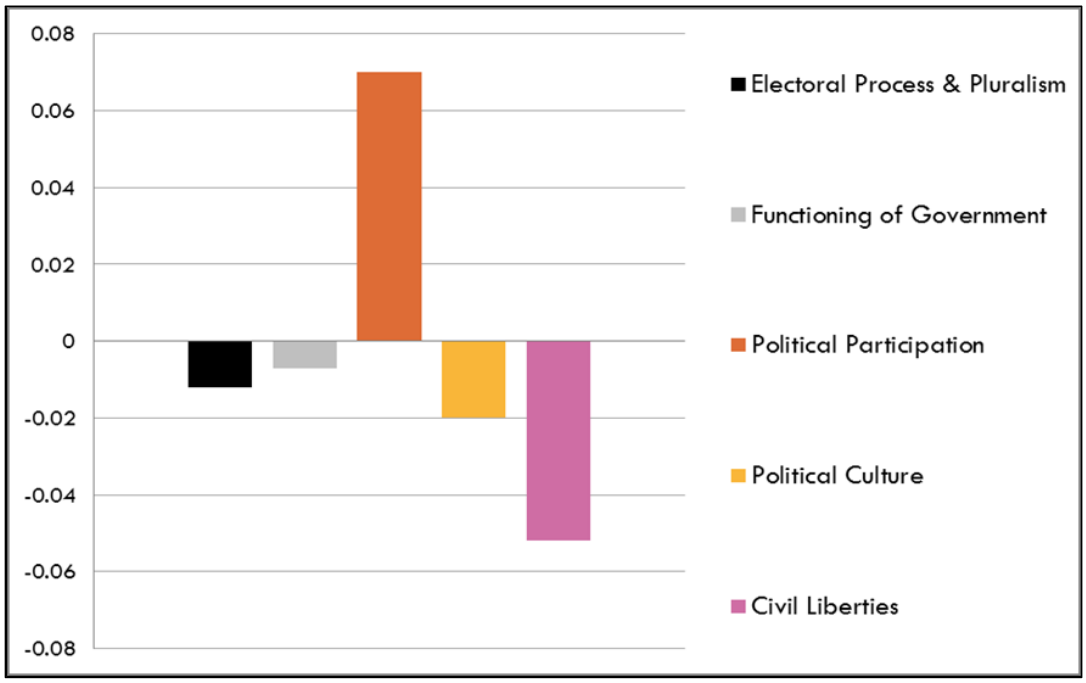
The relatively modest movement at the global level in EIU's index may mask certain underlying trends. Disaggregating EIU's global average by category demonstrates that a comparatively large increase in the "political participation" category in 2017 as compared to 2006 helped balance out declines in every other category, with the "civil liberties" category particularly negatively affected (see **Figure 5** below).

[38] Some of these shifts may illustrate the inherent arbitrariness in continuous variable-based categorization regimes when applied to "borderline" cases. For instance, the United States was downgraded to a "flawed democracy" in 2017, but its overall democracy score, at 7.98 (on EIU's 0 to 10 scale), was .03 below the threshold for continued status as a "full democracy."

[39] Uruguay was the only country upgraded from "flawed democracy" to "full democracy" in 2017 as compared to 2006. Countries downgraded from "full democracy" to "flawed democracy" included Belgium, Costa Rica, Czech Republic, France, Greece, Japan, the United States, and Portugal. Countries upgraded from "authoritarian regime" to "hybrid regime" included Pakistan, Morocco, Burkina Faso, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and Nepal. Tunisia was upgraded two categories from "authoritarian regime" to "flawed democracy." Countries downgraded into the "authoritarian regime" category included Venezuela, Cambodia, Ethiopia, and Burundi.

Figure 5. *Democracy Index* Changes by Category, 2006 vs. 2017

Change in Global Averages in 2017 as compared to 2006



Source: EIU Democracy Index 2006; EIU Democracy Index 2017.

Notes: The vertical axis represents the change in each category normalized to a 0 to 1 scale. Calculations are by CRS.

The "political participation" category, which increased by a larger margin than any of the other categories declined, consists of numerous quantitative indicators not included in Freedom House's index. Many of these relate to the level of political engagement by citizens, such as voter participation rates, the rate of membership in political parties, and the level of interest in politics (as captured by public opinion polls). Some might argue that these indicators and some others included in this category, such as the level of adult literacy, while conducive to a healthy democracy, are peripheral to its core definition.

EIU's "electoral process and pluralism" and "functioning of government" categories, which both declined slightly, contain many aspects in common with Freedom House's political rights category, with a focus on the elements of free and fair elections and free political participation as well as the exercise of power by elected officials, corruption, and government transparency, among other elements.[40] EIU's "political culture" category, which suffered a slightly larger decline, consists of measures of the level of support for democratic (or antidemocratic) norms among the population, including the level of popular support for democracy and the level of support for "strong leaders" who bypass elections.[41]

Finally, EIU's "civil liberties" category decreased by the largest margin and includes numerous elements that are roughly analogous to those found in Freedom House's own civil liberties

[40] The functioning of government category, which decreased by a smaller margin than did Freedom House's identically named subcategory, also incorporates some public opinion polling, such as measures of public confidence in government and political parties.

[41] Freedom House's index does not feature indicators of this type. See the "Challenges to Democracy's Global Appeal as a Political System" section for discussion of polling data on levels of support for democracy around the world.

subcategories. These include indicators relating to free media and access to information, freedom of expression for individuals, associational rights, freedom from torture and the enjoyment of basic security, the independence of the judiciary, respect for religious freedom, equal treatment under the law, and others.

Thus, similar to Freedom House's data, EIU's index might be characterized as reflecting relatively smaller declines in elections and political participation aspects of democracy while registering larger declines in civil liberties-related elements. As noted, in the aggregate these declines are in part counter-balanced by improvements in the "political participation" measure, which may indicate increasing levels of democratic political engagement, broadly defined.

Interpreting the Declines

The above analysis appears to support the growing consensus that the *global expansion* of democracy has been halted for more than a decade. Freedom House's historical data indicates that the decline since 2005 is the most sustained setback to the gradual expansion of political rights and civil liberties since Freedom House began reporting on these measures in 1972. While declines in EIU's index have been less uniform, EIU's data also indicates that democracy has not advanced since 2006. Findings from another democracy index not analyzed here, the Varieties of Democracy Project (V-Dem), similarly show a lack of democratic progress at the global level in recent years.[42]

The magnitude of actual *global backsliding* during this period, however, is less clear. As noted above, according to the Freedom House data, the combined global average level of political rights and civil liberties was 3.2% lower in 2017 than the all-time high in 2005. According to EIU's data, the overall decline was more modest, with less than a 1% decrease in the global average level of democracy in 2017 as compared to 2006.[43]

These arguably modest declines are potentially more worrying for democracy proponents when examined in terms of relative population sizes. According to Freedom House, while the percentage of "free" countries decreased one percentage point from 2005 to 2017 (from 46% to 45%), the percentage of the world's population living in a "free" country declined by seven percentage points during this same period (from 46% to 39%). EIU's figures similarly indicate that the percentage of the world's population living in either a "full" or a "flawed" democracy was below 50% in 2017, with 4.5% living in the former.[44] This appears to comport with findings from the aforementioned V-Dem measure, which indicate that the global level of democracy is lower when taking population size into account.[45] This difference has become more pronounced in recent years because democratic declines may have disproportionately centered on countries with large populations, such as Brazil, India, and Russia, while many of the improving countries have been those with small populations such as Burkina Faso, Fiji, and Sri Lanka.[46]

---

[42] The most recent V-Dem annual report, covering 2017, found that the global level of democracy remained close to its all-time high, but that there has been a "small decline" in the measure of "liberal democracy" in the past few years. See V-Dem Institute, *V-Dem Annual Democracy Report 2018*.

[43] As discussed above, this decline would have been greater were it not for gains in EIU's political participation category.

[44] The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2017: Free speech under attack*.

[45] This reflects the combined impact of a small number of nondemocratic countries with large populations, such as China, as well as numerous small countries with high democracy scores. See V-Dem Institute, *V-Dem Annual Democracy Report 2018*.

[46] V-Dem Institute, *V-Dem Annual Democracy Report 2018*; Staffan Lindberg, "The Nature of Democratic Backsliding

Underlying trends in these indexes also point to some level of commonality in terms of what aspects of democracy may have seen the most pronounced declines. As the data disaggregation above illustrates, in both the Freedom House and EIU measures, the aspects of democracy relating to political competition and electoral processes appear to have suffered relatively modest declines as compared to the broader rights and institutions that are associated with well-functioning and truly "free" liberal democratic political systems, such as free and independent media, freedom of expression, freedom of association, and the rule of law.[47] A potential explanation is that some governments may be inclined to focus on improving "what shows," such as elections, while neglecting or actively undermining less visible and less easily measured elements of democracy.[48] This may also comport with research of longer-term trends indicating that "democratic backsliding" has over time become less overt and more incremental, consisting for instance of censorship and media restrictions, relatively subtle tactics to tilt the electoral playing field, or engineered deteriorations in judicial independence, as opposed to outright electoral fraud or blatant and sudden executive power grabs.[49]

Outlook and Historical Context

Despite the negative direction of these indexes in recent years, the potential implications for the longer term trajectory of democracy remain unclear. Notably, some experts have previously critiqued the accuracy of measured declines.[50] More broadly, and from a longer term historical perspective, analysts have noted that significant "reverse waves" against democratic expansion have been observed in prior periods before giving way once more to continued democratization. Samuel P. Huntington famously observed two prior such "reverse waves," the first lasting from 1922 to 1945 and the second from 1960 to 1975, during which the number of democracies in the world regressed significantly before giving way to renewed democratic expansion and eventual new highs in global levels of democracy around the world.[51] Experts who have warned of challenges facing democracy in this current period concede that a comparable third such "reverse wave" has not yet manifested itself.[52]

Those who have cautioned against excessive pessimism about the present state of democracy argue that the number of democracies in the world remains near its all-time peak, and contend

---

in Europe," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 24, 2018.

[47] This finding also aligns with the V-Dem data, which indicate that "core electoral aspects of democracy" are improving in many countries, but that media freedom, freedom of expression, and the rule of law have declined in both democracies and nondemocracies. See V-Dem Institute, *V-Dem Annual Democracy Report 2018*. Concerning media freedom in particular, this also comports with Freedom House's and EIU's separate rankings on the state of press freedoms around the world. In both cases, their most recent report found press freedoms to be at their lowest point in over a decade. See Freedom House, *Freedom of the Press 2017*, and the rankings under the "freedom of speech under attack" section within EIU, *Democracy Index 2017: Free speech under attack*.

[48] Valeriya Mechkova, Anna Lührmann, and Staffan I. Lindberg, "How Much Democratic Backsliding?" *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 28, no. 4 (October 2017), pp. 162-169.

[49] Nancy Bermeo, "On Democratic Backsliding," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 27, no. 1 (January 2016), pp. 5-16.

[50] In 2015, Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way contended that the "democratic recession" was a myth to that point, arguing in part that the perceived declines related to dashed hopes from excessive optimism over the prospects for democracy in the initial post-Cold War period, an optimism that may have affected democracy ratings during that period. See Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, "The Myth of the Democratic Recession," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 26, no. 1 (January 2015), pp. 45-58. See also discussion of critiques of democracy indexes in **Appendix A**.

[51] Samuel P. Huntington, "Democracy's Third Wave," *Journal of Democracy*, Spring 1991, pp. 12-34.

[52] Larry Diamond, "Reviving the Global Democratic Momentum," in *Does Democracy Matter? The United States and Global Democracy Support*, pp. 119-133.

that the current alarm is partly the result of an inclination to focus on certain prominent cases of perceived decline while overlooking positive news, such as improvements in certain countries in Asia and Africa (according to EIU's index).[53] Nonetheless, the negative trend lines particularly in the past few years have led to yet unresolved questions over whether democratic setbacks are best characterized as "localized and transitory" or whether a more significant global reversal is underfoot.[54]

Factors Potentially Affecting Democracy Globally

A number of key factors that analysts believe may be affecting democracy in many countries around the world are discussed below. These broadly relevant, overarching factors may interact with relevant context-specific historical, political, social, and economic circumstances in particular regions or countries. (See **Appendix B** for a list of CRS reports that contain democracy-related discussions in particular contexts.)

Geopolitics and Authoritarian Power

Many observers contend that democracy's prior periods of expansion in the 20th century were due in part to the influence of the most powerful countries in the international system and their efforts to shape an international environment conducive to democracy. After World War II, the United States and other leading democracies sought to embed democratic norms within multilateral institutions, including the United Nations (U.N.), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the European Union (EU), and later the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), among others. Thus to a certain extent democracy was built into the operating system of the international order and was sometimes linked with security and economic benefits in a way that incentivized countries to meet democratic standards.[55] Perhaps not coincidentally, the spread of democracy around the world since the mid-1970s in particular also coincided with an arguably greater emphasis on human rights and democracy in U.S. foreign policy.[56] The economic dominance of the United States in this period also enhanced its cultural influence in ways that may have promoted democratization in closed societies.[57]

In the current period, however, the share of global income accounted for by countries rated "not free" by Freedom House has, according to one calculation, now reached over 30% (as compared to 12% in 1990).[58] As these nondemocratic countries develop economically, their relative capacity to project power in their geographic neighborhoods and beyond is expected to continue to

[53] Thomas Carothers, "Is the United States Giving Up on Supporting Democracy Abroad?" Foreign Policy, September 8, 2016; Thomas Carothers and Richard Youngs, "Democracy is Not Dying," *Foreign Affairs*, April 11, 2017.

[54] Adrian A. Basora and Kenneth Yalowitz, "Introduction," in *Does Democracy Matter? The United States and Global Democracy Support*, pp. ix-xiii.

[55] Robert Kagan, "The Weight of Geopolitics," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 26, no. 1 (January 2015), pp. 21-31. The importance of democratic values to some of the aforementioned international institutions, however, has not been uninform across institutions or across time. For example, analysts note that NATO was established foremost on the basis of shared opposition to the Soviet Union and increasingly emphasized democratic values over time. See Nikolas K. Gvosdev, "Realist Counsel on Democracy Promotion," *in Does Democracy Matter? The United States and Global Democracy Support*, pp. 7-31.

[56] See discussion in the "Democracy Promotion, Congress, and U.S. Policy" section above and CRS Report R44858, *Democracy Promotion: An Objective of U.S. Foreign Assistance*, by Marian L. Lawson and Susan B. Epstein.

[57] Yascha Mounk and Roberto Stefan Foa, "The End of the Democratic Century," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2018, pp. 29-36.

[58] Ibid.

increase. If perceptions about the role of the United States and other liberal democracies in having created favorable conditions for democracy are accurate, this rising authoritarian power arguably has the potential to conversely move the international political environment in a direction less hospitable to democracy.

Democracy scholars increasingly focus on the potentially widespread negative impacts to democracy from influential and "activist" authoritarian regimes.[59] The growing international assertiveness of these countries, China and Russia foremost among them, is said to be putting the leading democracies "on the defensive."[60] Many U.S. policymakers had hoped that Chinese and Russian engagement with the United States and other democracies, their membership in an array of international institutions, and their economic growth from participation in the international trading system might contribute to a gradual political liberalization in both countries, but these hopes have largely not come to fruition.[61] Rather, both China and Russia, according to a RAND report, "resent key elements of the U.S. conception of postwar order, such as promotion of liberal values … viewing them as tools used by the United States to sustain its hegemony."[62] According to a 2017 U.S. intelligence community assessment, Russia has a "longstanding desire to undermine the US-led liberal democratic order."[63] Notably, the Trump Administration's December 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) appears to emphasize some ideological aspects of U.S. competition with these countries.[64]

Some of the foreign policy activities of influential authoritarian countries may already be having negative impacts on democracy internationally, such as by

[59] Agnieszka Marczyk, "Academic Conclusions, Working Hypotheses, and Areas for Further Research," in *Does Democracy Matter? The United States and Global Democracy Support*, pp. 159-162.

[60] For example, see Marc F. Plattner, "Liberal Democracy's Fading Allure," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 28, no. 4 (October 2017), pp. 5-14; Christopher Walker, "What is "Sharp Power"?" *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 29, no. 3 (July 2018), pp. 9-23.

[61] The Trump Administration's December 2017 National Security Strategy reflects this view. With regard to China, it states, "For decades, U.S. policy was rooted in the belief that support for China's rise and for its integration into the post-war international order would liberalize China. Contrary to our hopes, China expanded its power at the expense of the sovereignty of others." The White House, "National Security Strategy of the United States of America," December 2017.

[62] Michael J. Mazarr et al., *Understanding the Current International Order*, RAND Corporation, 2016. An illustrative example of this view featured in an often cited address by Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2007. Speaking to attendees at the Munich Security Conference, Putin criticized the Organization for Security Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) by stating, "People are trying to transform the OSCE into a vulgar instrument designed to promote the foreign policy interests of one or a group of countries…. According to the founding documents, in the humanitarian sphere the OSCE is designed to assist country members in observing international human rights norms at their request. This is an important task. We support this. But this does not mean interfering in the internal affairs of other countries, and especially not imposing a regime that determines how these states should live and develop. It is obvious that such interference does not promote the development of democratic states … it makes them dependent and, as a consequence, politically and economically unstable." See "Putin's Prepared Remarks at 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy," *Washington Post*, February 12, 2007.

[63] Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections," January 6, 2017.

[64] In describing the challenges to the United States presented by China and Russia, as well as by rogue states and nonstate actors, the NSS states, "These are fundamentally political contests between those who favor repressive systems and those who favor free societies." Reflecting on China's growing influence, the NSS asserts that "a geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order is taking place in the Indo-Pacific region." The White House, "National Security Strategy of the United States of America," December 2017.

- attempting to undercut international support for democratic norms or related human rights norms;[65]
- eroding democracy's appeal by serving as examples of economically successful alternative political systems;[66]
- providing aid or other support that undermines democracy or the prospects for democratization in recipient countries;[67]
- subverting democratic institutions or norms within existing democracies through "soft" and "sharp" power projection;[68] and
- actively or indirectly supporting the diffusion of techniques or tools for repressing political dissent.[69]

Some aspects of these challenges are discussed in the sections that follow.

Challenging the Universality of Democratic Norms

The rising international influence of authoritarian states is being accompanied to a certain extent by challenges to the idea that international norms relating to democracy and human rights are universally applicable. Although concerning for democracy proponents, the overall scope and impact of these efforts to date is unclear.

Both China and Russia in particular actively emphasize norms of state sovereignty and "noninterference" in international relations.[70] Russia's emphasis on noninterference can take the form of defending respect for "traditional values." Within Russia, "traditional values" have been invoked to justify discriminatory policies against particular groups, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) communities. Internationally, Russia has pushed for acceptance of its "traditional values" concept within the U.N. Human Rights Council.[71] Russia's restrictive policies for civil society groups operating within Russia, justified on the basis of protecting against

[65] See below discussions in this section.

[66] See relevant discussions in the "Challenges to Democracy's Global Appeal as a Political System" section.

[67] China, Russia, and Saudi Arabia, for instance, have all arguably engaged in attempts to "prop up" nondemocratic governments in geographic proximity to them, such as in Burma, North Korea, Tajikistan, Ukraine, Syria, and others. These and other examples are discussed in Lucan Way, "Weaknesses of Autocracy Promotion," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 27, no. 1 (January 2016). Democracy aid experts argue that foreign aid from many nondemocracies may have negative impacts on democracy in recipient countries even if not aimed at doing so, such as by providing assistance that is free of democracy- or good governance-related conditions. See Thomas Carothers, "Democracy Aid at 25: Time to Choose," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 26, no. 1 (January 2015), pp. 59-73. Notably, the United States and other democracies also provide assistance to some nondemocratic governments in the pursuit of U.S. security or other interests. See relevant discussions in the "Debates over Democracy Promotion in U.S. Foreign Policy" section.

[68] See text box further down in this section.

[69] See the "Modern Methods of Political Control" section.

[70] Alexander Cooley, "Countering Democratic Norms," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 26, no. 3 (July 2015), pp. 49-63; Michael J. Mazarr, Timothy R. Heath, and Astrid Stuth Cevallos, *China and the International Order*, RAND Corporation, 2018; Andrew Radin and Clinton Bruce Reach, *Russian Views of the International Order*, RAND Corporation, 2017. These efforts may be rooted in defensive regime survival motivations (see relevant discussions under the "Promoting Authoritarianism?" section). The extent to which either country consistently abides by sovereignty norms is questionable, particularly given recent revelations of political interference activities.

[71] Alexander Cooley, "Countering Democratic Norms," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 26, no. 3 (July 2015), pp. 49-63. See also for example U.N. Human Rights Council, A/HRC/RES/21/3, "Promoting human rights and fundamental freedoms through a better understanding of traditional values of humankind: best practices," October 9, 2012.

foreign influence, have also arguably engendered replication elsewhere (see discussion in the "Modern Methods of Political Control" section).[72]

China's general posture is characterized by one scholar as offering "a critique of Western-style capitalism, liberal democracy and 'so-called universal values,' while presenting itself as a pragmatic, nonjudgmental partner interested only in 'win–win cooperation.'"[73] China's principles of noninterference and respect for what has been termed "civilizational diversity" are said to undergird its engagement with foreign aid recipients such that this aid is largely free of governance conditions.[74] Notably, according to one analysis, the top recipients of Chinese aid from 2000 to 2014 were nearly all nondemocracies.[75] Principles of noninterference also appear to be manifest in China's efforts to promote the concept of "cyber sovereignty," arguably implicit within which is the notion that countries should be free to censor or otherwise control internet content within their borders.[76] As with Russia, China has begun to introduce resolutions and amendments at the U.N. Human Rights Council that some researchers and human rights advocates argue aim to undermine respect for universal human rights norms.[77]

The multilateral Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which includes China and Russia as influential member states, also operates according to these principles of respect for sovereignty and noninterference.[78] A 2006 joint statement by the SCO reads: "Diversity of civilization and model of development must be respected and upheld. Differences in cultural traditions, political and social systems, values and model[s] of development formed in the course of history should not be taken as pretexts to interfere in other countries' internal affairs."[79] Although the SCO has traditionally been a regional grouping with members composed of largely authoritarian states in Central Asia, India and Pakistan joined as member states in 2017. According to some analysts, SCO's promotion of "civilizational diversity" norms may be undermining regional respect for democratic principles and having a negative impact on the democracy-related work of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).[80]

---

[72] Ibid. Also see relevant background in CRS Report R44775, *Russia: Background and U.S. Policy*, by Cory Welt.

[73] Aaron L. Friedberg, "Competing with China," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, June-July 2018, pp. 7-64.

[74] Alexander Cooley, "Countering Democratic Norms," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 26, no. 3 (July 2015), pp. 49-62; Shanthi Kalathil, "Redefining Development," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 29, no. 2 (April 2018), pp. 52-58.

[75] See Minxin Pei, "A Play for Global Leadership," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 29, no. 2 (April 2018), pp. 37-51. Some statistical analysis suggests that when controlling for other factors, recipient countries' level of democracy may not influence Chinese aid allocation, at least with regard to aid to Africa. See Alex Dreher et al., "Apples and Dragon Fruits: The Determinants of Aid and Other Forms of State Financing from China to Africa," *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 61, no. 1 (March 2018), pp. 182-194.

[76] Adam Segal, "When China Rules the Web," *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2018; Elliott Zaagman, "Cyber Sovereignty and the PRC's Vision for the Global Internet," *Jamestown Foundation China Brief*, June 5, 2018.

[77] See Ted Piccone, *China's Long Game on Human Rights at the United Nations*, Brookings Institute, September 2018; John Fisher, "China's 'Win-Win' Resolution is Anything But," Human Rights Watch, March 5, 2018; Nick Cumming-Bruce, "China Brings Warm Words to U.N., and Rights Activists Feel a Chill," *New York Times*, March 23, 2018.

[78] Alexander Cooley, "Countering Democratic Norms," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 26, no. 3 (July 2015), pp. 49-62; Shanghai Cooperation Organization, "Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization," June 2002.

[79] Shanghai Cooperation Organization, "Declaration on the Fifth Anniversary of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization," June 2006.

[80] Alexander Cooley, "Countering Democratic Norms," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 26, no. 3 (July 2015), pp. 49-63; Alexander Cooley, "The League of Authoritarian Gentlemen," Foreign Policy, January 30, 2013.

Promoting Authoritarianism?

Although some of their foreign policy actions may be harmful to democracy, the intentions of particular authoritarian states as they relate to democracy are complex and contested. Many authoritarian leaders are understood to be driven by a desire to maintain power and ensure regime stability, goals that are believed to influence their foreign policy decisions.[81] China's focus on ensuring continued Communist Party of China (CPC) rule, for instance, may influence its foreign policy decisionmaking;[82] the foreign policy actions of other influential authoritarian governments such as Russia and Iran may also be shaped by regime threat concerns.[83] These defensive regime threat imperatives may manifest themselves in the foreign policy of states differently and inconsistently, and thus with varying implications for democracy. In general, to date there is more evidence that some authoritarian governments may hope to "contain" the spread of democracy because of its potential threat to their own regime stability than there is of broad, affirmative agendas to promote authoritarianism.[84]

Some experts contend that authoritarian states often pursue narrow economic and geopolitical interests in their foreign policies, with support for autocrats or the undermining of democracy sometimes instrumental or incidental to the pursuit of these other ends. In this argument, Russia's support for authoritarian governments, for instance, has often been opportunistic, rooted in the desire for control over energy resources or other economic or geopolitical ends. It is also limited in scope by a cultural emphasis on the "Russian world."[85] Some analysts, however, assert that Russia's desire to insulate itself against potential democratic political change does color its foreign policy in ways that include an interest in influencing the regime types of its neighbors.[86]

China's government is said to maintain a "regime-type neutral" approach to foreign policy by which it seeks good relations with countries where it has particular interests without regard to the nature of their political systems. In the words of one analyst, China to this point has exhibited "no missionary impulse to promote authoritarianism," even as its foreign policy efforts may sometimes undermine democracy or lend prestige to authoritarian systems.[87]

---

[81] Christopher Walker, "The Hijacking of "Soft Power"," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 27, no. 1 (January 2016), pp. 49-63.

[82] China identifies maintaining its current political system and ensuring "overall social stability" [社会大局稳定] as among the "core interests" [核心利益] that it seeks to safeguard in its foreign relations. See People's Republic of China State Council Information Office White Paper on "China's Peaceful Development" [中国的和平发展], September 2011. See also relevant discussions in CRS Report R41007, *Understanding China's Political System*, by Susan V. Lawrence and Michael F. Martin, and in Michael J. Mazarr, Timothy R. Heath, and Astrid Stuth Cevallos, *China and the International Order*, RAND Corporation, 2018. Notably, some analysts argue that China's international behavior is not driven by domestic political factors to the extent as is commonly believed. See Paul Heer, "Understanding the Challenge from China," *The Asan Forum*, April 3, 2018.

[83] CRS Report R44017, *Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies*, by Kenneth Katzman; Andrew Radin and Clinton Bruce Reach, *Russian Views of the International Order*, RAND Corporation, 2017.

[84] Marc F. Plattner, "Liberal Democracy's Fading Allure," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 28, no. 4 (October 2017), pp. 5-14; Christopher Walker, "The New Containment: Undermining Democracy," World Affairs, May/June 2015.

[85] Lucan Way, "Weaknesses of Autocracy Promotion," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 27, no. 1 (January 2016), pp. 64-75.

[86] Nicholas, Bouchet, "Russia and the Democracy Rollback in Europe," German Marshall Fund of the United States, May 2015. Bouchet argues that this interest is present even if it is sometimes subordinated to other foreign policy goals in a manner not unlike how democracy promotion by the United States and other countries is pursued unevenly in the presence of competing priorities.

[87] Andrew J. Nathan, "China's Challenge," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 26, no. 1 (January 2015), pp. 156-170. See also relevant discussions under "Democracy's Instrumental Appeal."

Should their capabilities and opportunities continue to expand, it is possible that powerful nondemocracies could gradually begin to undertake more explicit and affirmative efforts to promote authoritarian political systems. Analysts have noted that the democracy promotion goals adopted by the United States and other democracies emerged over a period of time and expanded in scope and ambition concomitant with the expansion of these countries' international power and influence.[88] That said, those democracy promotion efforts, in the words of one analyst, have arguably been motivated by "a clear normative commitment to democracy as a universal value," and sustained in part by genuine enthusiasm for democratic norms across many societies.[89] While authoritarian political systems may increasingly hold instrumental appeal, it is not clear that affirmative formulations of "authoritarian values" could garner similar normative enthusiasm.

Notably, even the most politically repressive governments tend to continue to couch their own political systems in the language of democracy, using terms such as "socialist democracy," while maintaining elements, such as political parties and elections, that give the appearance of democracy.[90] Moreover, efforts by China and Russia to promote norms of strong respect for noninterference and for differing political systems, while problematic for democracy promotion efforts, would seem to be at odds with more normatively ambitious and activist forms of authoritarianism promotion.

Authoritarian "Soft" and "Sharp" Power[91]

Analysts have expressed concern over whether the "soft power" promotion of leading authoritarian states may undermine aspects of democracy. According to Joseph S. Nye, "soft power" refers to the ability of states to achieve their goals through means of attraction and persuasion (as opposed to through coercion). The soft power efforts of authoritarian states vary widely and can take a range of forms, including investments in international media, support for educational initiatives and cultural exchange programs, foreign aid, and other types of international engagement. Because effective soft power derives in part from the energies of nongovernmental civil society, efforts by authoritarian states to a certain extent may be impaired by the tight governmental control and closed political systems of their sponsoring countries.[92]

Some analysts now argue that certain efforts by authoritarian states are better understood using the concept of "sharp power" in that they focus on manipulation and distraction rather than on persuasion. Some of these efforts may be characterized as defensive because they seek to bolster the image of the sponsoring country and minimize negative information, but in so doing they may show disregard for or undermine democratic norms such as free

[88] Nicholas, Bouchet, "Russia and the Democracy Rollback in Europe," German Marshall Fund of the United States, May 2015.

[89] Lucan Way, "Weaknesses of Autocracy Promotion," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 27, no. 1 (January 2016), pp. 64-75.

[90] For example, see relevant discussions in CRS Report R41007, *Understanding China's Political System*, by Susan V. Lawrence and Michael F. Martin, and CRS Report R44822, *Cuba: U.S. Policy in the 115th Congress*, by Mark P. Sullivan.

[91] For examples of recent discussions and research into these issues, see Christopher Walker, "The Hijacking of "Soft Power," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 27, no. 1 (January 2016), pp. 49-63; Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, "The Meaning of Sharp Power," *Foreign Affairs*, November 16, 2017; National Endowment for Democracy International Forum for Democratic Studies, *Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence*, December 2017; Ann-Marie Brady, "Magic Weapons: China's political influence activities under Xi Jinping," Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, September 2017; Center for European Policy Analysis, *Winning the Information War Redux*, April 2017.

[92] The extent to which sometimes considerable investments in soft power by these governments (China, for instance, has been estimated to spend $10 billion annually on "external propaganda" efforts) have paid commensurate dividends to date is unclear. The top performing soft power countries in the world in 2018 according to a prominent global index were all democracies (China and Russia were ranked 27th and 28th, respectively). See Joseph S. Nye, "What China and Russia Don't Get About Soft Power," Foreign Policy, April 29, 2013; David Shambaugh, "China's Soft Power Push," Foreign Affairs, July/August 2015; USC Center on Public Diplomacy and Portland, *The Soft Power 30: A Global Ranking of Soft Power 2018*, July 2018.

expression or academic freedom. Other activities, particularly some Russian efforts in the media space, may aim to proactively sow a corrosive general distrust toward the media and objective truth within target countries. As has been widely reported, authoritarian governments have also engaged in direct and covert political interference activities within numerous democracies, sometimes with more particular political goals.

Challenges to Democracy's Global Appeal as a Political System

Signs of backsliding within existing democracies in recent years have led some experts to question whether the appeal and prestige of democracy as a political system itself is eroding around the globe. Although political conditions are highly contextualized within individual countries, citizens in a geographically and culturally diverse set of democracies have shown apparent willingness to "cast votes in large numbers for candidates whose commitment to liberal democracy was highly questionable."[93] Arguably authoritarian or authoritarian-leaning leaders are currently in power or have previously been elected in countries as varied as Venezuela, Turkey, the Philippines, and Peru. Aspects of liberal democracy such as respect for individual rights, freedom of the press, and the rule of law have come under particular attack in many countries.

Within Western democracies such as Hungary and Poland, leaders and political parties who hold views contrary to democratic norms have also achieved electoral success. Notably, Hungary's Viktor Orbán, who was overwhelmingly elected in April 2018 to a third consecutive term as prime minister, has spoken of constructing an "illiberal state," a project alleged by critics to entail hollowing out pluralism and ensuring the dominance of the ruling party over the long term.[94]

Political scientists have traditionally viewed countries that have reached a certain level of wealth and have experienced peaceful democratic political transitions as being stable, "consolidated" democracies largely impervious to backsliding into nondemocratic forms of government. Arguably weakening support for democracy within some long-established democracies, however, has spurred an emerging and highly contested debate over whether democratic "deconsolidation" is more possible than previously believed.[95]

Populism and Nationalism[96]

Many observers have expressed concern in recent years over the potential threat to democracy from populist and nationalist political parties and candidates, which have emerged within both new and old democracies in various regions. Analysts concerned over these trends point to examples of democratic erosion in countries such as

[93] Marc F. Plattner, "Liberal Democracy's Fading Allure," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 28, no. 4 (October 2017), pp. 5-14.

[94] Arch Puddington, *Breaking Down Democracy: Goals, Strategies, and Methods of Modern Authoritarians,* Freedom House, June 2017.

[95] For arguments supporting an emerging "democratic deconsolidation" thesis, see Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, "The Democratic Disconnect," *Journal of Democracy,* vol. 27, no. 3 (July 2016), pp. 5-17, and a later piece by the same authors, "The Signs of Deconsolidation," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 28, no. 1 (January 2017), pp. 5-15. For critiques of these arguments, see *Journal of Democracy*, "Online Exchange on "Democratic Deconsolidation" at https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exchange-%E2%80%9Cdemocratic-deconsolidation%E2%80%9D.

[96] William A. Galston, "The Populist Challenge to Liberal Democracy," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 29, no. 2 (April 2018), pp. 5-19; Yascha Mounk, "The Undemocratic Dilemma," *Journal of Democracy,* vol. 29, no. 2 (April 2018), pp. 91-112; Thomas Carothers and Richard Youngs, "Democracy is Not Dying," *Foreign Affairs,* April 11, 2017; Takis S. Pappas, Distinguishing Liberal Democracy's Challengers," *Journal of Democracy,* vol. 27, no. 4 (October 2016), pp. 22-36; Manuel Funke, Morit Schularick, and Christoph Trebesch, "Going to Extremes: Politics after Financial Crises,

Hungary and Venezuela, where nationalist and populist leaders, once elected, have sought to subvert not just aspects of liberal democracy but arguably also core elements of free and fair democratic political competition. While acknowledging the genuine threat of some of these movements to democracy, some analysts have warned against overgeneralizing populist or nationalist movements, noting that even within the same region these movements can arise as a result of different circumstances in each country. Moreover, they contend that not every such movement is necessarily threatening to democracy, and may center on legitimate policy debates. Some research and commentary has connected aspects of rising populism and nationalism in the West in particular to events such as the 2008 financial crisis or, more recently, refugee in-flows. Other research indicates, however, that populist parties in Europe have been gradually rising in popularity for decades, suggesting also longer-term factors.

Democracy's Instrumental Appeal

Support for democracy around the world may rest on a combination of its intrinsic and its instrumental appeal. Whereas democracy's intrinsic appeal is rooted in personal and political freedoms, its instrumental appeal is associated with perceived positive outputs resulting from democratic governance, such as economic growth and national prestige. Some analysts assert that particularly after the end of the Cold War, many countries pursued democratizing political reforms at least in part because democracy was seen as the only viable pathway to high economic growth, modernity, and national prestige. As discussed above, democratization was also associated with membership in international institutions that provided instrumental economic and security benefits.[97]

If traditionally high levels of support for democracy around the world have related at least in part to its instrumental appeal, then challenges within democracies in recent years (including within the United States) may be eroding support for democracy as a political system. According to the U.S. intelligence community, some of these challenges include poor governance, economic inequality, and "weak national political institutions."[98] Many challenges facing newer democracies in particular may relate to difficulties in establishing modern states capable of providing services in line with the demands of their citizens.[99] The connection between democracy and attainment of the economic and security rewards of certain international institutions may also be loosening. Apparent democratic backsliding among some member states in the EU (such as Hungary and Poland) and NATO (such as Turkey) have called into question the ability and inclination of these institutions to enforce democratic standards for countries that have already acceded to membership.[100]

1870-2014," Center for Economic Studies & Ifo Institute Working Paper, October 2015; Ronald F. Inglehart and Pippa Norris, "Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash," Harvard Kennedy School Faculty Research Working Paper, August 2016.

[97] Roberto Stefan Foa, "Modernization and Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 29, no. 3 (July 2018), pp. 129-140; Robert Kagan, "The Weight of Geopolitics," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 26, no. 1 (January 2015), pp. 21-31.

[98] Daniel R. Coats, "Statement for the Record: Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community," February 13, 2018.

[99] Francis Fukuyama, "Why is Democracy Performing so Poorly?" *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 26, no. 1 (January 2015), pp. 11-20.

[100] In December 2017, the EU launched a process that could sanction Poland over judicial reforms alleged to constitute a "clear risk of a serious breach of the rule of law." In September 2018, the European Parliament, citing a "systemic threat" to EU values, the rule of law, and fundamental rights, voted in favor of initiating a similar process against Hungary. The governments of Poland and Hungary strongly contest these allegations. Many analysts regard it as unlikely that the EU procedures will result in concrete measures, such as stripping Poland or Hungary of their voting rights in the Council of the EU, because unanimity among the other member states is required to do so.

Relatedly, a class of economically successful authoritarian capitalist states has emerged. To the extent that these countries, China foremost among them, are able to continue to grow at high rates while forestalling political liberalization, they may gradually be undermining the appeal of democracy as a political system by disconnecting it from its perceived association with economic success, modernity, and prestige.[101] Recent statements by Xi Jinping have led some observers to assert that China is now openly embracing this role.[102] In October 2017, Xi stated that China's model of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" could serve as a "new choice" for countries hoping to speed up their development and preserve their independence.[103] Xi later stated, however, that China will not "export" its political model or ask that other countries copy China's methods.[104]

The U.S. Example[105]

Many believe that democracy's appeal around the world has historically been enhanced by the capacity of the United States to serve as an attractive example. In recent years, some Members of Congress and others have argued that challenges in the U.S. political system are hampering the United States' ability to effectively project democratic values abroad. Experts point to problems such as polarization and polarizing rhetoric, institutional gridlock, and eroding respect for democratic norms as potentially undermining U.S. democracy promotion efforts. According to Freedom House, the United States has suffered a "slow decline" in political rights and civil liberties for several years, a deterioration that it says "accelerated" in 2017. The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) for the first time categorized the United States as a "flawed democracy" in its report covering 2017 (although, as noted earlier in this report, its score narrowly missed continued categorization as a "full democracy" according to EIU).

Measures of Support for Democracy[106]

Perhaps reflecting some of the dynamics discussed above, a Pew Research Center report summarizing 2017 polling data across a set of 38 geographically and economically diverse countries found mixed attitudes about the performance of democracy. Nonetheless, the same

---

[101] Roberto Stefan Foa, "Modernization and Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 29, no. 3 (July 2018), pp. 129-140; Marc F. Plattner, "Liberal Democracy's Fading Allure," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 28, no. 4 (October 2017), pp. 5-14. Plattner points out that in a 2014 speech, Hungary's Viktor Orbán stated that liberal democracies "will probably be incapable of maintaining their global competitiveness," and pointed to Singapore, China, India, Russia, and Turkey as examples of "successful" models that are not organized as liberal democracies.

[102] Richard McGregor, "Xi Jinping's Ideological Ambitions," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 1, 2018.

[103] Xi Jinping's Report at the CPC 19th Party Congress [习近平作十九大报告全文实录], October 18, 2017.

[104] Xi Jinping's Speech at the High-Level CPC Dialogue with World Political Parties [习近平在中国共产党与世界政党高层对话会上的主旨讲话], December 1, 2017. An English write-up of this speech is available at Xinhua, "Xi calls on world political parties to build community with shared future for mankind," http://www.xinhuanet.com//english/2017-12/02/c_136794028.htm.

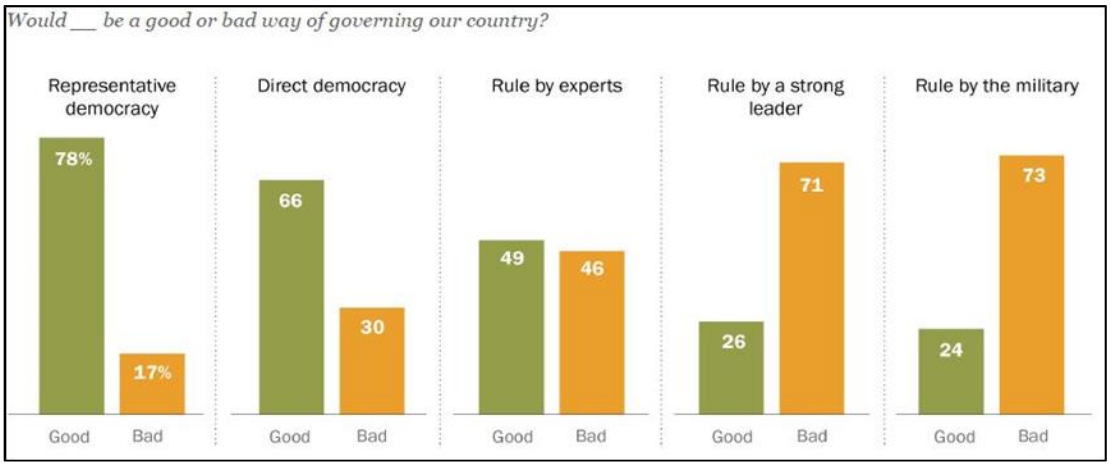
[105] U.S. Congress, House Foreign Affairs Committee, *Democracy Promotion in a Challenging World*, hearings, 115th Congress, 2nd sess., June 14, 2018; Sen. Jeff Flake, "Truth and Democracy," remarks in the Senate, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 164 (January 17, 2018), pp. S215-S217; Larry Diamond, "How to Reverse the Degradation of Our Politics," The American Interest, November 10, 2017; Larry Diamond, "Reviving the Global Democratic Momentum," in *Does Democracy Matter? The United States and Global Democracy Support*, pp. 119-133; Stephen M. Walt, "Why is America so Bad at Promoting Democracy in Other Countries?" Foreign Policy, April 25, 2016; Thomas Carothers, "Democracy Promotion Under Trump: What Has Been Lost? What Remains?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 6, 2017; Freedom House, "Democracy in Crisis," *Freedom in the World 2018*; The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2017: Free speech under attack*.

[106] Research Associate Ana Sorrentino provided research assistance for this section.

report indicated that support for democracy as a political system remains high, with support far exceeding most nondemocratic alternatives. A median of 78% of respondents approved of representative democracy, while more than 70% disapproved of either rule by a "strong leader" or rule by the military. The only nondemocratic alternative to garner plurality approval was "rule by experts." (See **Figure 6** below.) Approximately 23% of respondents expressed support for representative democracy *and* rejected all three nondemocratic alternatives posed. Pew found that the proportion of these "committed democrats" in a country was correlated with its level of wealth as well as its level of democracy as measured by EIU, suggesting that support for democracy is highest within richer and more democratic countries.[107]

Figure 6. Level of Support for Democracy Versus Nondemocratic Alternatives

Median levels of support among 38 countries (Spring 2017)



Source: Pew Research Center graphic from Richard Wike et al., "Globally, Broad Support for Representative and Direct Democracy," Pew Research Center, October 16, 2017.

Beyond this broad snapshot, analyses of polling data measuring support for democracy over time and within individual countries does not appear to demonstrate a single, clear overall global negative trend. For instance, an analysis sought to gauge the trajectory of support for democracy across 134 countries since 1990 by statistically aggregating data from a large number of polls. The findings indicated that baseline levels of support for democracy differed between established democracies, new democracies, and nondemocracies (with levels of support generally highest within established democracies), but that recent trend-lines across each type varied across countries and regions. Some countries exhibited a distinct downward trajectory of support in recent years, while others showed marked increases during the same period. Many countries showed relatively stable levels of support.[108]

This mixed picture is also reflected in trends within regional polls. For instance, according to a 2014-2015 poll of 34 African countries, since 2012 support for democracy had increased in 10

[107] Richard Wike et al., "Globally, Broad Support for Representative and Direct Democracy," Pew Research Center, October 16, 2017. The report utilized the EIU democracy index data covering 2016.

[108] Christopher Claassen, "Support for democracy is declining – but not in the U.S. or other Western democracies," *Washington Post*, July 5, 2018; Christopher Claassen, "In the Mood for Democracy? Democratic Support as Thermostatic Opinion," July 2018 (working paper). The findings also indicated that support for democracy may sometimes increase when democracy is eroding within a particular country and decrease in times of greater democratic health.

countries, decreased in 14 countries, and had no statistically significant change in 10 countries.[109] Among nine countries in the Middle East and North Africa region, polling data comparing levels of support for democracy in 2010-2011 versus 2012-2014 shows that support remained essentially unchanged in five countries, decreased in two countries, and increased in two countries.[110] Within Latin America, although there have been considerable changes in levels of support within particular countries, the aggregate level of support across the region has reportedly remained largely unchanged since 1995.[111]

These varied trend-lines are perhaps unsurprising given the myriad distinct political, social, and economic contexts and developments within countries around the globe. Nonetheless, they may also indicate that support for democracy as a political system, at least among general publics, is not eroding to the degree that many democracy proponents fear. Rather, to the extent that public opinion polling is a reliable indicator (see text box below), support overall appears resilient to this point. This may buttress the claim, as articulated by one scholar, that "democracy may be receding in practice, but it is still ascendant in peoples' values and aspirations … few people in the world today celebrate authoritarianism as a superior moral system … [or] the best form of government."[112]

Limitations and Caveats Around Measuring Support for Democracy[113]

Public opinion polling is one of the few concrete means for measuring support for democracy among average citizens around the world. Nonetheless, there are various potential shortcomings and response biases associated with polls that attempt to measure support for democracy, as well as wide disagreements over how to interpret polling data. For instance, the concept of democracy may mean different things to different people across time and cultural contexts. Along these lines, some argue that there have been generational shifts in conceptions of democracy, making long-term time series data difficult to compare. Another example of potential response bias is that positive connotations around the concept of democracy may create social pressure for respondents to overstate their level of support. Respondents in authoritarian political systems may also exhibit self-censorship. Finally, the relationship between attitudes toward democracy and the stability (or lack thereof) of democracies is not necessarily straightforward.

Modern Methods of Political Control

In addition to concerns over their international influence, nondemocracies are also using new and sophisticated tools to forestall the potential formation of democratizing forces within their own societies. Many of these modern tools may be less heavy-handed, and thus less likely to engender

[109] The measure of support for democracy here refers to the proportion of those that prefer democracy *and* reject all three alternatives of dictatorship, military rule, and one-party rule. The overall figure stood at 46%. Robert Mattes and Michael Bratton, "Do Africans still want democracy?" Afrobarometer Policy Paper No. 36, November 2016.

[110] Level of support here refers to the percentage of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed that "despite its problems, democracy remains the best system." Michael Robbins, "People Still Want Democracy," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 26, no. 4 (October 2015), pp. 80-89.

[111] The Economist, "Neither Trumpian nor Brexiteer: Latin America has different worries from the United States and Europe," September 3, 2016.

[112] Larry Diamond, "Reviving the Global Democratic Momentum," in *Does Democracy Matter? The United States and Global Democracy Support*, pp. 119-133.

[113] Helena Schwertheim, *Measuring Public Support for Democracy*, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2017; Amy C. Alexander and Christian Welzel, "The Myth of Deconsolidation: Rising Liberalism and the Populist Reaction," *Journal of Democracy* web exchange, April 28, 2017; Darrel Robinson and Marcus Tannenberg, *Self-Censorship in Authoritarian States: Response bias in measures of popular support in China*, Varieties of Democracy Institute (working paper), April 2018.

societal backlash, than traditional forms of repression. They may also be less resource intensive. These methods, some of which are discussed below, are thus potentially contributing to more durable forms of nondemocratic governance.[114]

Civil Society Restrictions[115]

Civil society organizations (CSOs), which are often viewed as an important component of sustainable democracy, are confronting growing limitations on their ability to operate around the world.[116] From restrictions on the types of funding they are allowed to receive to stringent registration requirements, the measures targeting CSOs are increasingly putting pressure on the entire civil society sector in certain countries.[117] These restrictions are most commonly, but not exclusively, imposed by authoritarian and hybrid regimes seeking to limit the influence of nongovernmental actors. This phenomenon is commonly referred to by researchers and advocates as the "closing space" for civil society work around the world.[118]

The origins of the closing space phenomenon vary and are often country-specific. That said, scholars have pointed to several factors that have contributed to the spread of civil society restrictions. After the end of the Cold War era, Western governments, including the United States, substantially increased funding for pro-democracy CSOs. Concurrently, a number of events caused some governments to view the civil society sector warily, including the color revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, the later Arab Spring movements, and others.[119] Publicly, many states have sought to justify civil society restrictions on national security and counterterrorism grounds; critics argue that such measures are merely pretexts for cracking down on certain civil society sectors or activities.[120] Some countries have also justified civil society restrictions, particularly those concerning foreign funding, on the basis of sovereignty.[121]

---

[114] The extent to which nondemocratic governments are able to deliver economic growth and public services for their citizens also likely enhances their domestic political legitimacy and durability. See also the "Structural Conditions" section.

[115] This section was primarily authored by Research Associate Ana Sorrentino. Portions are drawn from a prior, archived CRS report on this subject by Alex Tiersky and Emily Renard.

[116] While often used interchangeably with terms such as "nonprofit organizations" and "nongovernmental organizations," civil society is generally recognized to also include a range of organizations such as labor unions, activist or civic coalitions, watchdog groups, professional associations, religious groups, political movements, and/or chambers of commerce.

[117] A 2012 report identified six types of legal barriers: barriers to entry, barriers to operational activity, barriers to speech and advocacy, barriers to communication and cooperation, barriers to assembly, and barriers to resources. International Center for Not-for-Profit Law & World Movement for Democracy Secretariat at the National Endowment for Democracy, *Defending Civil Society*, June 2012.

[118] A separate but related phenomenon is that of authoritarian governments increasingly creating and funding "government-organized NGOs," or GONGOs. While these organizations purport to legitimately represent social movements or interest groups, their objectives are generally to advance the state's goals and broadcast its agenda both at home and abroad. See "What Is A GONGO?," Foreign Policy, October 13, 2009; Ambassador Daniel B. Baer, "Mind the GONGOs: How Government Organized NGOs Troll Europe's Largest Human Rights Conference," U.S. Mission to the OSCE, September 30, 2016.

[119] Thomas Carothers and Saskia Brechenmacher, *Closing Space: Democracy and Human Rights Support Under Fire*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 20, 2014.

[120] Center for Strategic and International Studies Human Rights Initiative, *Counterterrorism Measures and Civil Society: Changing the Will, Finding the Way*, March 2018.

[121] Alexander Cooley, "Countering Democratic Norms," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 26, no. 3 (July 2015), pp. 49-63.

Experts cite Russia's suppression of civil society in particular as a model that other states may have sought to emulate.[122] Russian government measures restricting civil society have included requiring groups that receive foreign funding and engage in "political activity," broadly defined, to register as foreign agents. Later measures granted the Russian government the authority to unilaterally declare a CSO a foreign agent, as well as the discretion to shut down or limit the activities of CSOs deemed a threat to national security.[123]

A broad range of other governments have imposed similar restrictions on civil society. According to the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL), between 2012 and 2015, 60 countries enacted a total of over 120 laws to constrain the freedom of association or assembly (see **Figure 7** below).[124] In some cases, restrictions render the structure, funding streams, or activities of CSOs illegal or otherwise impossible to sustain, forcing organizations to cease operations. CSOs that depend on foreign funding or staff are particularly vulnerable, as are those that focus on social or political issues that can be deemed subversive or threatening to national interests pursuant to vaguely written laws.[125] In other cases, governments initiate investigations or legal proceedings against CSOs for alleged violations of laws related to CSO registration, funding, or activities. Such cases may be intended to drain CSOs of resources and/or to intimidate other groups into compliance.[126]

[122] Arch Puddington, *Breaking Down Democracy: Goals, Strategies, and Methods of Modern Authoritarians,* Freedom House, June 2017; Julia Broome and Iva Dobichina, "Turning the tide against the wave of civil society repression," International Service for Human Rights, June 5, 2015.

[123] Saskia Brechenmacher, "Delegitimization and Division in Russia," *Civil Society Under Assault: Repression and Responses in Russia, Egypt, and Ethiopia*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 18, 2017.

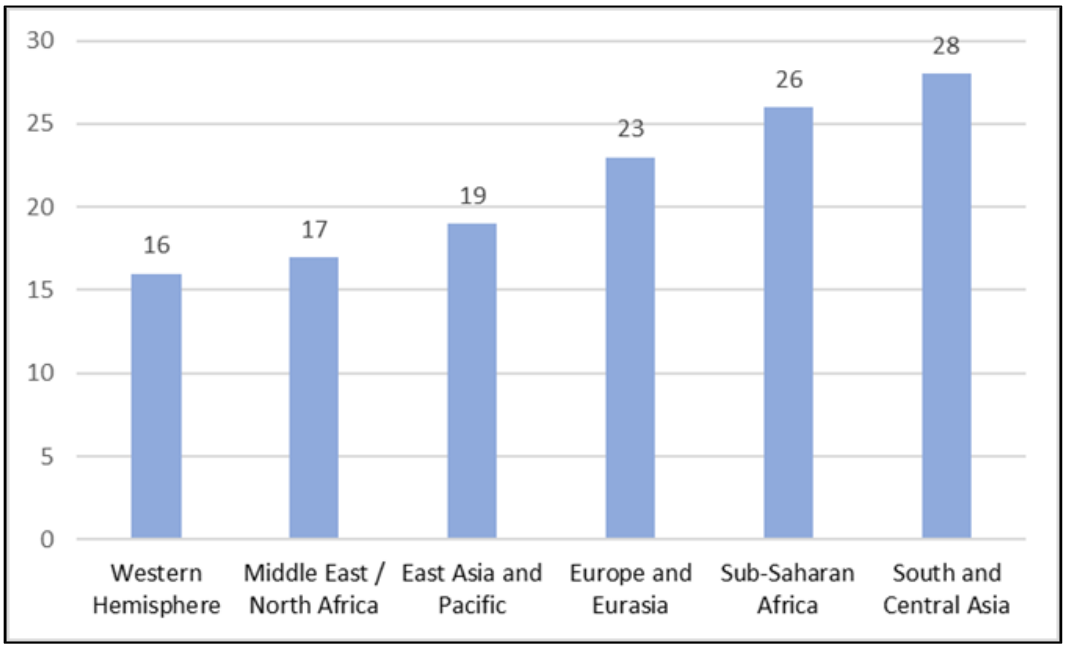
[124] Douglas Rutzen, "Civil Society Under Assault," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 26, no. 4 (October 2015), pp. 28-39. Also see U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) regional civil society sustainability indexes, accessible at https://www.usaid.gov/what-we-do/democracy-human-rights-and-governance/supporting-vibrant-civil-society-independent-media.

[125] For example, see Kendra E. Dupuy, James Ron, and Aseem Prakash, "Who Survived? Ethiopia's regulatory crackdown on foreign-funded NGOs," *Review of International Political Economy,* vol. 22, no. 2 (2015), pp. 419-456.

[126] According to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "as of November 2016, Russian authorities had launched 235 judicial proceedings against NGOs for alleged noncompliance with government regulations—in addition to 98 cases initiated by NGOs themselves to challenge government fines and interference. These types of cases require significant resources, time, and organizational capacity." Saskia Brechenmacher, "How State Restrictions Are Reshaping Civic Space Around the World," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 22, 2017.

Figure 7. Geographic Distribution of Initiatives to Restrict Civil Society

2012-2015



Source: Graphic adapted from Douglas Rutzen, "Civil Society Under Assault," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 26, no. 4 (October 2015), pp. 28-39.

Technological Tools[127]

Optimism about the potential democratizing power of new information technologies, the internet, and social media has been tempered in recent years as nondemocratic governments have grown more adept at using technological means to censor, monitor, distort, or otherwise repress potential social and political opposition.[128] In general, many emerging technologies are perhaps best understood as "dual use" in the sense that, depending on how they are utilized, they have the potential for both positive and negative impacts on democracy. Authoritarian governments appear to have shown an ability to mitigate many of the politically threatening aspects of these new technologies, and over time may increasingly have the capacity to actively leverage them in service of social and political control.

Efforts to restrict free expression online have accelerated in some countries since the aforementioned color revolutions and the Arab Spring movements, which saw activists and citizens share information and organize mass protests via social media in an unprecedented fashion.[129] According to Freedom House, internet freedom restrictions can be divided into three

[127] Research Associate Ana Sorrentino provided significant research and writing support for this section.

[128] Joshua A. Tucker et al., "From Liberation to Turmoil: Social Media and Democracy," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 28, no. 4 (October 2017), pp. 46-59; Espen Geelmuyden Rød and Nils B Weidmann, "Empowering activists or autocrats? The Internet in authoritarian regimes," *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 52, no. 3 (February 2015), pp. 338-351.

[129] Courtney C. Radsch, "Treating the Internet as the enemy in the Middle East," Committee to Protect Journalists, April 27, 2015; Kris Ruijgrok, "From the Web to the Streets: Internet and Protests under Authoritarian Regimes," *Democratization*, vol. 24, no 3 (2017), pp. 498-520.

main categories: obstacles to access, limits on content, and violations of user rights.[130] Obstacles to access may relate to poor infrastructure or high costs, but also to blanket and deliberate outages, such as during politically sensitive periods or in politically sensitive areas. Content limitations consist of proactive efforts to shape the information environment online such as through technical filters or censors to block websites and/or certain content.[131] In some cases, governments may also use forms of offline punishment such as criminal or extralegal detention to deter individuals from engaging in certain online speech or political organizing.[132] Relatedly, government-sponsored cyberattacks on media outlets, opposition leaders, and activists are also reportedly on the rise.[133]

Increasingly, government efforts also extend to active manipulation of online discourse through automated bots or paid commentators, which artificially spread pro-government messages or use misinformation to distract or confuse online audiences, thereby "drowning out" the online speech of individuals seen as threatening to the government.[134] According to the U.S. intelligence community, the use of these tactics by governments around the world has "increased dramatically in the past 10 years."[135]

Human rights organizations argue that well-resourced and technologically advanced authoritarian states are also developing and deploying advanced technologies to more comprehensively track the online and offline activities of their citizens in ways that may be aimed, at least in part, at anticipating and repressing sources of political dissent. China's efforts are foremost among these and include facial recognition-enhanced public surveillance and the use of "big data" information collection and aggregation technologies.[136] These and other emerging technologies may

[130] Freedom House, "Freedom on the Net Methodology," accessed at https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net-methodology.

[131] Chinese government-mandated efforts in this area are generally seen as the most sophisticated and comprehensive in the world. See, for example, recent reports concerning the use of algorithms to censor images on China's most popular social media platform: Jeffrey Knockel et al., "(Can't) Picture This," The Citizen Lab, August 14, 2018. Also see CRS Report R45200, *Internet Freedom in China: U.S. Government Activity, Private Sector Initiatives, and Issues of Congressional Interest*, by Patricia Moloney Figliola.

[132] Taylor C. Boas, "Weaving the Authoritarian Web: The Control of Internet Use in Nondemocratic Regimes," in *How Revolutionary Was the Digital Revolution? National Responses, Market Transitions, and Global Technology*, ed. John Zysman and Abraham Newman (Stanford, CA: Stanford Business Books, 2006), p. 361-378; Freedom House, *Freedom on the Net 2017: Manipulating Social Media to Undermine Democracy*, November 2017; Joshua A. Tucker et al., "From Liberation to Turmoil: Social Media and Democracy," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 28, no. 4 (October 2017), pp. 46-59.

[133] Freedom House, *Freedom on the Net 2017: Manipulating Social Media to Undermine Democracy*, November 2017.

[134] Joshua A. Tucker et al., "From Liberation to Turmoil: Social Media and Democracy," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 28, no. 4 (October 2017), pp. 46-59. The authors note that events in recent years have also demonstrated that these tactics may also be used by certain actors within democracies in ways that similarly degrade and undermine genuine online discourse. See also Freedom House, *Freedom on the Net 2017: Manipulating Social Media to Undermine Democracy*, November 2017; Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, "How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, Not Engaged Argument," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 111, no. 3 (2017).

[135] Daniel R. Coats, "Statement for the Record: Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community," February 13, 2018.

[136] Human Rights Watch, "China: Police 'Big Data' Systems Violate Privacy, Target Dissent," November 19, 2017; Paul Mozur, "Inside China's Dystopian Dreams: A.I., Shame and Lots of Cameras," *New York Times*, July 8, 2018; Christina Larson, "Who needs democracy when you have data?" MIT Technology Review, August 20, 2018. China's use of these technologies has been particularly pervasive in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in China's northwest. See CRS In Focus IF10281, *Uyghurs in China*, by Thomas Lum.

increasingly use efficient and scalable forms of artificial intelligence (AI) that could lower the costs required for maintaining social control.[137]

Although the most advanced of these technologies are being developed in a small number of countries, they may increasingly spread to other governments over time. Analysts have noted, for instance, reports of Chinese-developed facial recognition technologies having already been marketed and sold to some foreign government customers.[138]

Structural Conditions

Some analysts contend that the lack of global democratic expansion in recent years, and its arguably modest backsliding, is rooted in unfavorable conditions for democratization in many of the world's remaining nondemocracies. These arguments draw on academic research indicating that structural conditions such as wealth, international linkages, and levels of inequality may have considerable impact on a country's likelihood of sustained democratization. Thus, according to some analysts, challenges in the current period are not particularly surprising, and might be expected to continue, because "nearly every country with minimally favorable conditions for democracy" had already democratized by the mid-2000s.[139]

These arguments may be buttressed by the fact that many factors that were previously understood by scholars to support democratization are increasingly believed to have more ambiguous effects. Increasing levels of wealth, for instance, may not be as closely associated with democratization as previously believed, and may contribute to regime stability for democracies and some authoritarian states alike.[140] Relatedly, the relationship between state capacity and democracy is complex and, according to some experts, not necessarily mutually supportive.[141] Within authoritarian regimes, strong state capacity may help forestall democratization by enhancing what scholars call "performance legitimacy" through the government's ability to provide valued public goods, as well as its capacity to monitor and respond to dissent.[142] Some research also supports what has been referred to as the "oil curse," or the notion that countries with natural resource wealth are less likely to democratize. This may be because their governments can use abundant revenues from these resources to similarly undercut societal demands for democracy (among other theorized causal factors).[143]

---

[137] Miles Bundage et al., *The Malicious Use of Artificial Intelligence*, Center for a New American Security, Electronic Frontier Foundation, University of Oxford, and other organizations (co-release), February 2018.

[138] Elsa B. Kania, "China's Ambitions in Artificial Intelligence: A Challenge to the Future of Democracy?" Power 3.0 Blog, International Forum for Democratic Studies, August 8, 2018.

[139] Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, "The Myth of the Democratic Recession," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 26, no. 1 (January 2015), pp. 45-58.

[140] Agnieszka Marczyk, "Academic Conclusions, Working Hypotheses, and Areas for Further Research," in *Does Democracy Matter? The United States and Global Democracy Support*, pp. 146-148. Roberto Stefan Foa has noted that 315 million people now live in authoritarian countries with per capita incomes above the "level that was once associated with regime transition," and that this number is over 800 million if China's coastal provinces are included. See Roberto Stefan Foa, "Modernization and Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 29, no. 3 (July 2018), pp. 129-140.

[141] Marczyk, "Academic Conclusions, Working Hypotheses, and Areas for Further Research," in *Does Democracy Matter? The United States and Global Democracy Support*, p. 142-144. Francis Fukuyama has cited examples of modern states having been created within authoritarian political systems, such as in China and elsewhere. See Francis Fukuyama, "States and Democracy," *Democratization*, vol. 21, no. 7 (December 2014), pp. 1326-1340.

[142] Roberto Stefan Foa, "Modernization and Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 29, no. 3 (July 2018), pp. 129-140.

[143] Michael Ross, "Does Oil Hinder Democracy?" *World Politics*, vol. 53, no. 3 (April 2001), p. 325-361; also see

How much any of these or other factors alone or together may affect the prospects for democratization in a given country is a complex and contested question. Experts who have emphasized these factors as helping to explain the challenges to democracy in the current period concede that favorable conditions are not always necessary for democratization, but contend that they are causally important.[144] Some analysts argue against excessive emphasis on these conditions and point to prior examples of democratization in countries where the scholarship would indicate this to be unlikely.[145]

Debates over Democracy Promotion in U.S. Foreign Policy

Rationales for U.S. democracy promotion are varied. As noted, U.S. leaders have long drawn links between the state of global democracy and U.S. national security and economic interests. In addition, Members of Congress and others have sometimes asserted that the United States has a moral obligation to promote democracy and human rights, and some scholars argue that an inclination within U.S. foreign policy for "values promotion" derives from fundamental aspects of American political culture.[146] Nonetheless, analysts continue to debate the extent to which the United States should promote democracy and what the proper balance of emphasis is between this objective and other foreign policy priorities. Some have questioned the appropriateness of democracy promotion at a basic level, such as by asserting that it constitutes an imposition of American values on other societies. There are also debates over whether these efforts constitute violations of sovereignty or improper interference in the politics of other countries.[147] Supporters of democracy promotion have defended these activities as legitimate and generally argue that aspirations for, and values reflecting, democratic freedoms are universal.[148]

More broadly, many disagreements over the proper placement of democracy promotion within U.S. foreign policy tend to relate to the extent to which democracy promotion is seen as supportive of U.S. national interests, the extent of its potential tension with the pursuit of other objectives, and whether the United States has the means and capacity over the long-term to

---

discussion in Agnieszka Marczyk, "Academic Conclusions, Working Hypotheses, and Areas for Further Research," in *Does Democracy Matter? The United States and Global Democracy Support*, pp. 150-151.

[144] Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, "The Myth of the Democratic Recession," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 26, no. 1 (January 2015), pp. 45-58.

[145] They cite countries such as India and Botswana, for instance. See Larry Diamond, "The Liberal Democratic Order in Crisis," *The American Interest*, February 16, 2018; Robert Kagan, "The Weight of Geopolitics," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 26, no. 1 (January 2015), pp. 21-31.

[146] Walter Russell Mead, "The Paradox of Democracy Promotion," *The American Interest*, April 9, 2015. Mead writes, "If one really believes that all people are created equal, and are endowed by their Creator with inalienable rights, it becomes very hard to believe that by 'all people' we mean merely 'all citizens of the United States of America.' There is a sense in which the legitimacy of American domestic institutions rests on a set of assumptions about what world society should be like, how all human beings should live."

[147] See for example recent critiques and defenses of U.S. democracy promotion programs in comparison to reports of Russian political interference: Daniel Twining and Kenneth Wollack, "Russia's nefarious meddling is nothing like democracy assistance," *Washington Post*, April 10, 2018; Thomas Carothers, "Is the U.S. Hypocritical to Criticize Russian Election Meddling?" *Foreign Affairs*, March 12, 2018; James Bovard, "Time for the US to end democracy promotion flim-flams," *The Hill*, March 16, 2018.

[148] See relevant discussions in CRS Report R44858, *Democracy Promotion: An Objective of U.S. Foreign Assistance*, by Marian L. Lawson and Susan B. Epstein.

effectively support the spread of democracy and prevent backsliding. These thematic trends are summarized below.

Relationship to U.S. Interests

Scholars, democracy promotion advocates, and U.S. policymakers have associated the spread of democracy around the world with U.S. interests in various ways. As noted earlier, the rationale for democracy promotion has rested on the contention that democracies are generally more reliable and trustworthy international partners of the United States, and on the argument that democracies are considerably less likely to go to war with one another. Regarding the former argument, some argue that democratic transparency may make democracies particularly conducive to supporting the international agreements and institutions that populate the current international order.[149] Accordingly, many believe that greater numbers of democracies supports the resilience of this order, which has arguably brought myriad economic and security benefits to the United States. Scholars continue to debate, however, the order's importance as compared to traditional relative power dynamics between countries.[150]

With regard to democratic peace, most scholars agree that, as a historical matter, democracies have rarely engaged in major military conflict with one another.[151] Some of the potential (and potentially mutually supportive) explanations for this include that the democratic and rights-respecting character of liberal democracies inculcates genuine mutual shared respect among democracies and also makes war against such a government less easily justified; and that democratic leaders operate within political systems that make them more inclined to peaceful resolution of conflicts, and expect leaders of other democracies to be similarly predisposed. That said, scholarly debate remains over the purported causal explanations for the democratic peace theory, with some arguing that these explanations have not been convincingly evidenced in the historical record, as well as other critiques of the theory.[152]

---

[149] G. John Ikenberry, "Why Export Democracy?" *The Wilson Quarterly*, vol. 23, No. 2 (Spring 1999), pp. 56-65. Ikenberry writes that the openness of democracies "provides their potential international partners with a set of something like verification tools. The partners can see their internal workings and judge for themselves whether promises and commitments are being kept."

[150] For examples of recent debates on this issue, see Graham Allison, "The Myth of the Liberal Order," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2018; Graham Allison, "The Truth About the Liberal Order," *Foreign Affairs*, August 28, 2018; Stephen Kotkin, "Realist World," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2018; Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, "Liberal World," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2018; Rebecca Friedman and Mira Rapp-Hooper, "The Liberal Order is More Than a Myth," *Foreign Affairs*, July 31, 2018; Michael J. Mazarr, "The Real History of the Liberal Order," *Foreign Affairs*, August 7, 2018.

[151] Notably, scholars who are proponents of this "democratic peace theory" generally do not make a broader claim that democracies are less prone to go to war in general. In fact, some assert that the factors that may explain the democratic peace may, conversely, make democracies more likely to engage in war with nondemocratic governments, whose legitimacy they question. This discussion draws on the summary of scholarly debates found in Sean M. Lynn-Jones, "Preface," in *Debating the Democratic Peace*, ed. Michael E. Brown, Sean M. Lynn-Jones, and Steven E. Miller (London: MIT Press, 1999), pp. ix-xxxiii. Also see relevant pieces therein by Michael W. Doyle, Bruce Russett, Christopher Layne, and others.

[152] For instance, there are debates over the direction of causality—whether democracies are more peaceful with each other because they are democratic, or whether the resolution of international security issues preceded democracy in many countries, and thus peace causes democracy more so than democracy causes peace. Other points of disagreement over democratic peace theory concern the statistical significance of the phenomenon; definitional disagreements over what constitutes a "democracy," and thus over the number of potential historical exceptions; and the extent to which other variables may explain the peace between democracies.

Moreover, observers note that existing threats to U.S. security, including "rogue" or revisionist governments and terrorist organizations, tend to be associated with or emanate from nondemocracies.[153] Some claim that liberal democratic political systems may be inherently less likely to suffer from internal armed conflicts or terrorism.[154]

Potential Tension with Other U.S. Policy Objectives

Democracy promotion may in some instances conflict with the pursuit of other U.S. foreign policy objectives, and the United States may thus face difficult trade-offs in its democracy promotion agenda. At a general level, U.S. emphasis on democracy promotion may contribute to greater levels of tension and distrust between the United States and nondemocratic governments, which can hamper the prospects for cooperation toward other objectives. For instance, the United States must often choose whether and to what extent to partner with and support nondemocratic governments such as those of Egypt and Saudi Arabia in the pursuit of shared counterterrorism or regional geopolitical goals. Similarly, in the midst of arguably growing geopolitical competition in Asia between the United States and China, some analysts argue that nondemocratic governments of key third countries such as Vietnam may be less inclined to align with the United States if it insists on strong adherence to democratic standards.[155] On the other hand, some argue that the United States' shared democratic values with its allies, as contrasted with the repressive political systems of its major authoritarian competitors, can be powerfully emphasized in its efforts to compete geopolitically with these countries.[156]

Scholarly research indicates that new democracies or countries in political transition may for a period be more nationalistic, less stable, and more likely to engage in conflict than other countries. New democratically elected governments may also in some instances be accountable to electorates that possess anti-American views, and may thus be less likely than the governments they replaced to see their interests as aligned with other U.S. objectives. Although democracies are generally believed to perform better at protecting human rights than nondemocracies, in some cases the introduction of democratic political competition in the absence of strong protections for individual rights may negatively affect the treatment of ethnic and religious minorities or other marginalized communities.[157]

---

[153] Richard Kramer, "A Case for Democracy Assistance and Ways to Improve It," *in Does Democracy Matter? The United States and Global Democracy Support*, ed. Adrian A. Basora, Agnieszka Marczyk, and Maia Otarashvili (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), pp. 33-49.

[154] Madeleine Albright, Mehdi Jomaa, Ted Piccone, and Cheryl Frank, *Liberal Democracy and the Path to Peace and Security*, Report of the Community of Democracies' Democracy and Security Dialogue, September 2017. See related issue-specific supporting reports at https://community-democracies.org/?page_id=78.

[155] Nikolas K. Gvosdev, "Realist Counsel on Democracy Promotion," *in Does Democracy Matter? The United States and Global Democracy Support*, pp. 7-31.

[156] See for example Aaron L. Friedberg, "Competing with China," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, June-July 2018, pp. 7-64. Friedberg writes that growing U.S.-China competition is "driven not only by the traditional dynamics of power politics … but also by a wide and deep divergence in values between their respective regimes…. American and allied policymakers cannot afford to downplay the ideological dimension in their own strategy…. China's rulers clearly believe the ideological realm to be a crucially important domain of competition, one that they would be only too happy to see the United States and other Western nations ignore or abandon." Some analysts caution against overemphasis of China as an ideological threat. See Paul Heer, "Understanding the Challenge from China," The Asan Forum, April 3, 2018.

[157] See illustrative discussions in Nikolas K. Gvosdev, "Realist Counsel on Democracy Promotion," *in Does Democracy Matter? The United States and Global Democracy Support*, pp. 7-31; Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, "Democratization and the Danger of War," in Debating the Democratic Peace, ed. Michael E. Brown, Sean M. Lynn-Jones, and Steven E. Miller (London: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 301-333; Walter Russell Mead, "The Paradox of

Conversely, unwavering support for repressive authoritarian governments in the pursuit of security interests can create anti-American resentments among the populations of these countries. This may create significant long-term negative impacts on relations in the event that these governments are toppled.[158] Moreover, some argue that support for democracy may in many instances have an underappreciated role in addressing security concerns over the longer term. For instance, promoting political inclusion and pluralism and the rule of law may help address the root causes of terrorism.[159]

Capacity and Effectiveness

Democracy promotion skeptics question the capacity of the United States to spread democracy in other countries whose societal, historical, and cultural contexts can differ markedly from the United States.[160] They cite unsuccessful, and sometimes counterproductive, efforts to promote democracy, particularly after military interventions, such as those undertaken in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Among democracy promotion supporters and detractors alike, there has been increasing understanding that democratization is a protracted, uncertain, and nonlinear process, with often considerable constraints on the ability of the United States (or others) to positively influence the process. Democracy promotion experts acknowledge that democratic transitions should be largely driven by internal forces, but contend that the United States or other external actors can in some instances play a productive supporting role. They cite numerous instances in which U.S. support may have done so, although attempting to evaluate the precise impact of U.S. democracy promotion efforts in specific instances is challenging given the complex factors affecting democracy in any given country at a given time.[161]

Democracy Promotion," *The American Interest*, April 9, 2015.

[158] Richard Kraemer, "A Case for Democracy Assistance and Ways to Improve It," in *Does Democracy Matter? The United States and Global Democracy Support*, pp. 33-49.

[159] Thomas Carothers, "Is the United States Giving Up on Supporting Democracy Abroad?" Foreign Policy, September 8, 2016. See also Cheryl Frank, "How human rights and the rule of law can address terrorism," Institute for Security Studies and Community of Democracies' Democracy and Security Dialogue, September 2017.

[160] For examples of both critical and supportive views of the capacity of the United States to promote democracy, see John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, "The Case for Offshore Balancing," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2016, pp. 70-83; Stephen M. Walt, "Why is America so Bad at Promoting Democracy in Other Countries?" Foreign Policy, April 25, 2016; Walter Russell Mead, "The Paradox of Democracy Promotion," *The American Interest*, April 9, 2015; Nikolas K. Gvosdev, "Realist Counsel on Democracy Promotion," *in Does Democracy Matter? The United States and Global Democracy Support*, pp. 7-31; Thomas Carothers, "Is the United States Giving Up on Supporting Democracy Abroad?" Foreign Policy, September 8, 2016; Thomas Carothers, "Democracy Aid at 25: Time to Choose," *Journal of Democracy* (January 2015), pp. 59-73; and Richard Kraemer, "A Case for Democracy Assistance and Ways to Improve It," in *Does Democracy Matter? The United States and Global Democracy Support*, pp. 33-49.

[161] Thomas Carothers writes that democracy promotion detractors often emphasize "a handful of the hardest cases," while neglecting to acknowledge "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." Regarding U.S. democracy promotion programs in particular, he writes, "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." Thomas Carothers, "Is the United States Giving Up on Supporting Democracy Abroad?" Foreign Policy, September 8, 2016.

Issues for Congress

Congress plays a key role in influencing and shaping many aspects of U.S. policy and programs relating to democracy promotion. As it carries out its legislative and oversight responsibilities, Congress may consider a number of questions in the current period and beyond.

How does the Trump Administration view democracy promotion?

The Trump Administration's views on democracy promotion may conflict with those of Members of Congress who support democracy promotion as a priority in U.S. foreign policy. Statements by the President and senior administration officials arguably have indicated a preference for downgrading democracy and human rights promotion in favor of greater emphasis on economic and security issues in U.S. foreign relations. Former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, in articulating the Administration's "America First" policy as it relates to foreign affairs, drew a distinction between U.S. foreign policies and U.S. values, the latter of which he described as relating to "freedom, human dignity, the way people are treated." He argued that "in some circumstances, if you condition our national security efforts on someone adopting our values, we probably can't achieve our national security goals or our national security interests … it really creates obstacles to our ability to advance our national security interests, our economic interests."[162]

This stated distinction between U.S. policies and values, and the absence of an explicit democracy promotion goal within the Administration's National Security Strategy (NSS), may represent a shift from recent prior administrations. The Administration has also proposed significant cuts to democracy promotion foreign assistance programs (specific figures are discussed in the following section) that have drawn criticism from some Members of Congress.[163] More broadly, some scholars and analysts charge that the Administration is failing to adequately defend the institutions of the international order, which, as discussed in earlier portions of this report, may support and/or be supported by shared democratic values.[164] In light of these and other developments, some observers contend that the Trump Administration may intend to move away from a U.S. leadership role in promoting democracy overseas.[165]

The Administration's degree of interest regarding democracy promotion may evolve over time, however, as has arguably been the case with prior administrations. The White House's February 2018 decision to cut foreign aid to the Cambodian government because of setbacks to democracy there led one analyst to assert that the Trump Administration's approach to democracy promotion is "not so clear cut."[166] Tillerson's successor, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, has indicated

---

[162] Rex W. Tillerson, "Remarks to U.S. Department of State Employees," May 3, 2017, available at https://www.state.gov/secretary/20172018tillerson/remarks/2017/05/270620.htm.

[163] U.S. Congress, House Foreign Affairs Committee, *The FY 2018 Foreign Affairs Budget*, hearings, 115th Congress, 1st sess., June 14, 2017; U.S. Congress; U.S. Congress, House Foreign Affairs Committee, *Democracy Promotion in a Challenging World*, hearings, 115th Congress, 2nd sess., June 14, 2018.

[164] See for example the recent petition signed by hundreds of international relations scholars, accessible at https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSesHdZWxpp13plS4nkLOSMHv4Dg1jaksBrCC6kWv6OfVAmO5g/viewform. For a critique of this petition see Stephen M. Walt, "Why I Didn't Sign Up to Defend the International Order," Foreign Policy, August 1, 2018.

[165] For example, see Joshua Kulantzick, "Trump Has Abandoned Democracy Promotion. Which Countries Could Fill the Void?" World Politics Review, March 19, 2018.

[166] Jessica Trisko Darden, "When it comes to democracy promotion, Trump picks and chooses," American Enterprise Institute blog, February 28, 2018. For more information about political developments in Cambodia and U.S. policy, see

support for democracy promotion. At his nomination hearing in April 2018, Pompeo stated that "if we do not lead the calls for democracy, for prosperity, and for human rights around the world, who will? No other nation is so equipped with the same blend of power and principal." At the same hearing, when asked, he affirmed that promoting democracy is in the national interest of the United States.[167] Also, as the Trump Administration has continued to develop and expound on its particular foreign policy strategies, some officials have emphasized democracy-related elements within these strategies.[168] The Administration has also emphasized democracy with regard to countries seen as hostile to the United States such as Venezuela and Iran. Nonetheless, there may continue to be points of tension between the Administration's approach to and prioritization of democracy promotion as compared to the preferences of some Members of Congress.

How much emphasis should the United States place on democracy promotion?

Supporters of democracy promotion have argued that challenges in the current period necessitate greater U.S. efforts and commitment in order to help forestall a more protracted decline.[169] Some contend that democracy promotion can usefully play a greater role in top-level U.S. foreign policy as it arguably has during some prior periods by seeking "transformative change in strategically important countries," and complementing and reinforcing ongoing U.S.-funded democracy promotion programs.[170] This could conceivably entail tools such as high-level diplomacy, significant trade or aid conditionality, or multilateral initiatives, and could potentially involve modifications of U.S. relations with certain nondemocracies. Such efforts might to a certain extent tie into broader efforts to defend the norms and institutions of the international order. Some of these issues are noted in subsequent questions below.

Given arguments that democracy promotion may entail trade-offs with regard to other U.S. interests, however, some analysts advocate a "triage" approach that weighs potential downside risks when determining which countries the United States should prioritize for democracy promotion.[171]

CRS Insight IN10918, *Cambodian Election*, by Thomas Lum, and CRS Report R44037, *Cambodia: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Thomas Lum.

[167] U.S. Congress, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, *Nomination Hearing for Mike Pompeo*, 115th Congress, 2nd sess., April 12, 2018.

[168] For instance, in describing the Administration's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy," a State Department official argued that the "free" component referred in part to a desire that countries in the region "become progressively more free—free in terms of good governance, in terms of fundamental rights, in terms of transparency and anti-corruption." See Deputy Assistant Secretary Alex N. Wong, "Briefing on The Indo-Pacific Strategy," April 2, 2018.

[169] For example, see Larry Diamond, "The Liberal Democratic Order in Crisis," The American Interest, February 16, 2018.

[170] Thomas Carothers, "Is the United States Giving Up on Supporting Democracy Abroad?" Foreign Policy, September 8, 2016; Thomas Carothers, "Democracy Aid at 25: Time to Choose," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 26, no. 1 (January 2015), pp. 59-73.

[171] Nikolas K. Gvosdev, "Realist Counsel on Democracy Promotion," *in Does Democracy Matter? The United States and Global Democracy Support*, pp. 7-31. Gsosdev writes that such an approach "recognize[s] that in some cases, democracy promotion will occur smoothly and will strengthen the US position the world," but that in other instances "there is a heightened risk of destabilization or the empowerment of governments less amenable to US interests." He adds that "policymakers ought to be able to provide answers to two key questions: (1) Where is the risk of instability justified?; and (2) Where must we recognize that we have little chance of succeeding with the effort to promote democracy, or that efforts will be wasted or even counterproductive?" See also triage discussion in Andrian A. Basora and Kenneth Yalowitz, "Policy Conclusions and Recommendations," in *Does Democracy Matter? The United States*

Those particularly critical of democracy promotion tend to argue that the United States should curtail these efforts in pursuit of a foreign policy that, in their view, more closely reflects U.S. capacity and the pursuit of vital U.S. interests.[172] Given present challenges in the U.S. political system, some also assert that one of the best means of promoting democracy abroad is for the United States to focus on shoring up democracy at home.[173]

What tools exist for targeted U.S. foreign policy responses to particular challenges?

Given that democratic declines in recent years may relate particularly to erosions in respect for freedom of expression and association, media freedom, and rule of law-related elements (see "Interpreting the Declines"), the United States may consider prioritizing new or continuing diplomatic, programmatic, or other tools that focus on these democracy elements. Toward this end, Congress may take stock of U.S. efforts to date to combat the impacts of closing space for civil society in countries around the globe. While the United States has engaged with and promoted civil society in other countries for decades, the U.S. government during the Obama Administration began to take specific actions aimed in part at addressing the closing space challenge. This included a Presidential Memorandum that directed executive departments and agencies to work with CSOs even when there are restrictive local laws and to oppose restrictions on civil society and fundamental freedoms (among other directives), funding for new CSO assistance programs, and other initiatives.[174]

Other new or existing tools might also focus on countering international efforts by nondemocratic governments in the media space that are corrosive to democracy. Notably, Congress in 2016 broadened the mandate of the State Department's Global Engagement Center (GEC) to include countering state-sponsored propaganda and disinformation (Section 1287 of P.L. 114-328).[175] GEC is in the process of awarding Public Diplomacy (PD) grants that are part of an "Information Access Fund," which the department says will "support public and private partners working to expose and counter propaganda and disinformation from foreign nations."[176] Also potentially

---

and Global Democracy Support, pp. 175-185.

[172] John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, "The Case for Offshore Balancing," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2016, pp. 70-83.

[173] Stephen M. Walt, "Why is America so Bad at Promoting Democracy in Other Countries?" Foreign Policy, April 25, 2016. Democracy promotion supporters by contrast emphasize that however damaging U.S. domestic challenges are to democracy promotion efforts, such efforts in any case should not be understood as premised on promoting replication of the U.S. model but rather aim to flexibly draw from and present comparative experiences across a range of different democratic political systems. Some also contend that those engaging in democracy promotion work may help "deflate perceptions of American arrogance" by openly acknowledging challenges to democracy in the United States. See Thomas Carothers, "Is the United States Giving Up on Supporting Democracy Abroad?" Foreign Policy, September 8, 2016.

[174] The White House, "Presidential Memorandum – Civil Society," September 23, 2014; The White House, "FACT SHEET: U.S. Support for Civil Society," September 29, 2015.

[175] The State Department states that the GEC is "currently consulting widely within the U.S. government, with allied governments, nongovernmental organizations, and civil society, as well as with private-sector experts about best practices in confronting state-sponsored propaganda and disinformation." U.S. State Department, "Global Engagement Center," accessed at https://www.state.gov/r/gec/.

[176] U.S. State Department, "State-Defense Cooperation on Global Engagement Center Programs and Creation of the Information Access Fund to Counter State-Sponsored Disinformation," February 26, 2018, accessed at https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/02/278851.htm; Grants.gov, "SFOP004178 Information Access Fund," accessed at https://www.grants.gov/web/grants/view-opportunity.html?oppId=302596.

relevant is the work of U.S. international broadcasting entities overseen or funded by the U.S. Agency for Global Media (formerly the Broadcasting Board of Governors, BBG).[177]

Congress may also consider whether and how to directly promote democracy through capacity building partnerships with other legislatures such as those carried out under the auspices of the House Democracy Partnership. The House Democracy Partnership was established in 2005 and is composed of 20 Members of the House of Representatives. It aims to promote "responsive, effective government and strengthening democratic institutions by assisting legislatures in emerging democracies." As of 2018, it has worked with partner legislatures in Afghanistan, Burma, Colombia, Georgia, Haiti, Indonesia, Iraq, Kenya, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Liberia, Macedonia, Mongolia, Pakistan, Peru, Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste, and Ukraine.[178]

How much funding should be provided for democracy promotion programs?

Congress may consider whether the current challenges to democracy have implications for the amount of funding appropriated for democracy promotion programs. In determining funding levels, Members of Congress may weigh a potential desire to respond to these challenges against the opportunity costs of these resources in light of numerous other funding priorities. On average, Congress has appropriated more than $2 billion annually in the past decade for democracy programs, broadly defined. The Trump Administration's FY2018 request proposed $1.689 billion for democracy promotion assistance, an estimated 32% decrease as compared to FY2017-enacted levels.[179] The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2018 (P.L. 115-141), ultimately specified approximately $2.479 billion for democracy promotion programs. The Administration's FY2019 budget has proposed $1.480 billion in democracy promotion assistance, an approximately 40% decrease from FY2018-enacted levels.[180]

How can democracy programs be meaningfully evaluated and/or usefully targeted?

Difficult to measure objectives, long time horizons, and other factors may make democracy promotion programs inherently more difficult to measure than many other foreign assistance programs. Moreover, according to one democracy aid expert, aid providers "too rarely fund the sort of in-depth, independent studies that examine the underlying assumptions, methods, and

[177] For background, see CRS Report R43521, *U.S. International Broadcasting: Background and Issues for Reform*, by Matthew C. Weed. In congressional testimony in September 2017, BBG CEO and Director John Lansing stated, "As U.S. international media, the BBG's mission is to inform, engage, and connect people around the world in support of freedom and democracy…. From Russia and its periphery, to China and East Asia, Iran and the Middle East, to Cuba, Venezuela and large parts of Latin America—audiences are under a disinformation assault from authoritarian regimes and are desperate for credible information…. To meet the challenge head-on, all five BBG networks are rapidly expanding our traditional radio and television distribution to digital, mobile and social networks so we are on the same playing field as our adversaries." See U.S. Helsinki Commission, "The Scourge of Russian Disinformation," September 14, 2017, accessed at https://www.csce.gov/international-impact/events/scourge-russian-disinformation.

[178] See hdp.house.gov.

[179] CRS Report R44858, *Democracy Promotion: An Objective of U.S. Foreign Assistance*, by Marian L. Lawson and Susan B. Epstein.

[180] Department of State, *Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Congressional Budget Justification, FY2019 Supplementary Tables*. All referenced figures include funding under the Governing Justly and Democratically (GJD) foreign assistance framework objective plus funding for the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

outcomes in a sector of democracy aid."[181] Although an evaluation commissioned in 2006 by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) found that USAID and democracy and governance programs had a positive impact on democracy, no comparable study has been conducted since.[182]

Many analysts have argued for what they consider to be more strategic targeting of democracy promotion resources, particularly in light of funding constraints. Some argue that such targeting is important because of perceived competing and more narrowly concentrated democracy-eroding external influences in some countries.[183] A broader policy of "triage," as mentioned above, could potentially help inform funding allocations. Analysts contend that these allocations may be usefully informed by criteria such as whether programs can be coupled with broader diplomatic efforts and/or whether conducive structural conditions are present.[184] Given recent democratic backsliding within existing democracies, some scholars have also warned against prematurely cutting off aid to new democracies.[185] Researchers have found that democracy programs are more effective when their goals align with broader U.S. policy and are supported by the use of diplomatic tools such as sanctions or aid conditionality.[186] Congress has a direct role in shaping these tools.[187]

Some experts have also argued for a more differentiated allocation of democracy promotion resources between the major funders (including USAID, the State Department, and the National Endowment for Democracy) based on the particular strengths of their funding models in relation to the type of project to be funded and the extent of political openness in the target country.[188]

---

[181] Thomas Carothers, "Democracy Aid at 25: Time to Choose," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 26, no. 1 (January 2015), pp. 59-73.

[182] CRS Report R44858, *Democracy Promotion: An Objective of U.S. Foreign Assistance*, by Marian L. Lawson and Susan B. Epstein.

[183] Arguing for responses to Russian efforts in Eastern Europe, for example, one analyst states, "Especially at a time of financial constraints in the West, a more strategic approach requires stricter prioritization of resources for countries that have made the most progress and are in a more democratic international context." Nicholas Bouchet, "Russia and the Democracy Rollback in Europe," German Marshall Fund of the United States, May 2015.

[184] Sarah Sunn Bush, "Three Lessons for Democracy Assistance Effectiveness," in *Does Democracy Matter? The United States and Global Democracy Support*, pp. 51-64; Melinda Haring, "Reforming the Democracy Bureaucracy," in *Does Democracy Matter? The United States and Global Democracy Support*, pp. 65-82. See also discussion in the "Structural Conditions" section above.

[185] Larry Diamond, "Reviving the Global Democratic Momentum," in *Does Democracy Matter? The United States and Global Democracy Support*, pp. 119-133.

[186] Sarah Sunn Bush, "Three Lessons for Democracy Assistance Effectiveness," in *Does Democracy Matter? The United States and Global Democracy Support*, pp. 51-64.

[187] Congress has enacted numerous potentially relevant sanctions tools, both country-specific legislation and global in scope. For background, see for example CRS In Focus IF10576, *The Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act*, by Dianne E. Rennack; CRS In Focus IF10905, *Targeting Foreign Corruption and Human Rights Violators in FY2018 Consolidated Appropriations*, by Liana W. Rosen, Derek E. Mix, and Michael A. Weber; CRS Report R43311, *Iran: U.S. Economic Sanctions and the Authority to Lift Restrictions*, by Dianne E. Rennack; and CRS Report R43888, *Cuba Sanctions: Legislative Restrictions Limiting the Normalization of Relations*, by Dianne E. Rennack and Mark P. Sullivan. Through the Millennium Challenge Corporation, Congress has also authorized and appropriated U.S. economic assistance that allocates funding to developing countries in part on the basis of performance on good governance, human rights, corruption, and rule of law indicators (among other indicators). See CRS Report RL32427, *Millennium Challenge Corporation*, by Curt Tarnoff. As discussed in the "Geopolitics and Authoritarian Power" section, the availability of aid from authoritarian governments may be undermining the effectiveness of some of these tools.

[188] Melinda Haring, "Reforming the Democracy Bureaucracy," in *Does Democracy Matter? The United States and Global Democracy Support*, pp. 65-82; Thomas O. Melia, "The Democracy Bureaucracy," *The American Interest*, June 1, 2006. See also discussions in CRS Report R44858, *Democracy Promotion: An Objective of U.S. Foreign Assistance*,

Scholars have noted that many programs carried out under the banner of promoting democracy may relate more closely to arguably tangential goals such as good governance, and some have questioned the assumption that these goals support democratization.[189]

Should the United States work to form new international initiatives to defend democracy?

In the view of some analysts, the more challenging international terrain for democracy and the growing influence of authoritarian countries in the current period calls for renewed and more robust international collaboration in defense of democracy and democratic norms. To that end, the United States might consider new initiatives among like-minded democracies, potentially including those outside of Western Europe and North America. Multilateral initiatives may usefully combat perceptions among some abroad that democracy promotion is linked to narrow U.S. geostrategic interests.[190] Relevant existing democracy-focused initiatives that might be utilized include the Community of Democracies and the Open Government Partnership.[191]

Some argue that the United States and other democracies should focus on countering efforts by nondemocracies to contest the universal applicability of democratic norms within international institutions.[192] Various U.N. bodies, the OSCE, and others should be increasingly viewed, in the words of one analyst, as "arenas of competition over democracy norms," and the United States should "do more to build up explicit democracy caucuses within these institutions" while also placing greater emphasis on the democracy elements of organizations such as NATO.[193] Relatedly, some analysts have argued for establishing multilateral groupings of democracies centered on combating political interference activities by authoritarian countries.[194]

Multilateral efforts may face limitations, however, because they are inherently complex and must account for differing ideas and interests among participating nations. They may entail participation from many newer democracies that have arguably not shown the same inclination to

by Marian L. Lawson and Susan B. Epstein.

[189] Sarah Sunn Bush, "Three Lessons for Democracy Assistance Effectiveness," in *Does Democracy Matter? The United States and Global Democracy Support*, pp. 51-64; Francis Fukuyama, "States and Democracy," *Democratization*, vol. 21, no. 7 (December 2014), pp. 1326-1340.

[190] Thomas Carothers, "Democracy Promotion Under Trump: What Has Been Lost? What Remains?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 6, 2017. See also Alexander Cooley, "Countering Democratic Norms," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 26, no. 3 (July 2015), pp. 49-63. Cooley notes perceptions abroad that the United States "acts hypocritically and applies double standards when it comes to so-called values issues," and argues for "disentangl[ing], as much as possible, the issue of perceived Western political decline from the fate of liberal democracy."

[191] The Community of Democracies was established in 2000 and is currently composed of 29 countries (including the United States). It "provides Member States with a forum in which to … identify global priorities for diplomatic action to advance and defend democracy, including through collective diplomatic action at the UN and in other multilateral fora." See Community of Democracies, "About the CoD," accessed at https://community-democracies.org/?page_id=32. The Open Government Partnership was established in 2011 and is currently composed of 75 participating countries (including the United States) that have committed themselves to adhering to principles of open and transparent government and have submitted independently monitored country action plans toward that purpose. See Open Government Partnership, "About OGP," accessed at https://www.opengovpartnership.org/about/about-ogp.

[192] Alexander Cooley, "Countering Democratic Norms," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 26, no. 3 (July 2015), pp. 49-63.

[193] Nicholas Bouchet, "Russia and the Democracy Rollback in Europe," German Marshall Fund of the United States, May 2015.

[194] Aaron L. Friedberg, "Competing with China," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, June-July 2018, pp. 7-64.

defend or promote democracy abroad as have the United States and other older democracies.[195] Some also contend that shared democratic principles alone may be insufficient as an organizing principle for collective action among nations.[196] Notably, in withdrawing from the U.N. Human Rights Council and pledging to cut funding to the council and to the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Trump Administration has arguably exhibited a preference against promoting "values" issues within certain multilateral venues.[197] Relatedly, the withdrawal from the council also removes the ability of the United States to vote against resolutions that are perceived to be aimed at undermining respect for democracy or human rights norms.[198]

Outlook

Looking forward, the trends analyzed and described in this report likely portend continued near-term constraints on democratic expansion around the world, and in some cases have the potential to pose a range of persistent challenges for policymakers. Congress may continue to grapple with policy considerations within and in light of this difficult context in the near future. As the above discussion illustrates, some of these considerations may relate to the overarching strategic orientation of U.S. foreign policy and democracy promotion's place within that, while others concern second order questions about particular means, resources, and resource allocation.[199] To the extent that there are differences in interest in democracy promotion between Members of Congress and the executive branch, these considerations may also entail questions about the institutional role of Congress in democracy promotion and in U.S. foreign policy generally.

[195] Marc F. Plattner, "Liberal Democracy's Fading Allure," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 28, no. 4 (October 2017), p. 5-14. Plattner posits that this may stem in part from lingering hostility to the West in many of these countries, and he questions the value of the association of liberal democracy with Western countries. See also related discussions in Richard Youngs, "Exploring "Non-Western Democracy"," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 26, no. 4 (October 2015), pp. 140-154.

[196] Nikolas K. Gvosdev, "Realist Counsel on Democracy Promotion," *in Does Democracy Matter? The United States and Global Democracy Support*, pp. 7-31.

[197] Mike Pompeo and Nikki Haley, "Remarks on the UN Human Rights Council," June 19, 2018; Associated Press, "US to Cut Funding to UN Human Rights Office," August 23, 2018.

[198] On March 23, 2018, before the U.S. withdrawal, the State Department stated in a press release that the United States had defended "the integrity of the U.N. human rights mechanisms" by "vot[ing] against a China-led resolution … which sought to weaken international human rights frameworks." U.S. State Department, "Key Outcomes of U.S. Priorities at the UN Human Rights Council's 37th Session," March 23, 2018.

[199] Perhaps most immediately, the latter category includes continued consideration of State Department, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs appropriations for FY2019 and the funding provided for democracy promotion programs therein.

Appendix A. Background Information on Democracy Indexes

Background on Freedom House's *Freedom in the World* Report

Freedom House's *Freedom in the World* report has measured the level of civil liberties and political rights in each country annually since 1972.[200] Freedom House reporting has also rated a varying number of territories each year; the ratings for these are not included in the data discussions in this report. According to Freedom House, its methodology is derived largely from the United Nations (U.N.) Universal Declaration of Human Rights and "operates from the assumption that freedom for all people is best achieved in liberal democratic societies."[201] Freedom House uses both in-house and external analysts and advisers to determine country ratings. Scores in each category, which are tabulated to determine overall political rights and civil liberties ratings, are guided by a set of methodological questions. For instance, under civil liberty's rule of law category, one of the questions is "Is there an independent judiciary?" along with associated sub-questions, such as "Do executive, legislative, and other governmental authorities comply with judicial decisions, and are these decisions effectively enforced?" Analysts use a range of sources including news articles, scholarly analysis, NGO reports, and in-country research.[202]

Freedom in the World's Methodology at a Glance

Number of Countries Evaluated (2017): 195 (Freedom House also evaluates a varying number of territories each year; for consistency, data for these are excluded from the analysis in this report)

Ratings: Countries are assigned a rating for both political rights and civil liberties based on scoring in discreet subcategories.

Political rights rating is determined by scores on 10 indicators in the categories of

- electoral process,
- political pluralism and participation, and
- functioning of government.

Civil liberties rating is determined by scores on 15 indicators in the categories of

- freedom of expression and belief,
- associational and organizational rights,
- rule of law, and
- personal autonomy and individual rights.

Country Statuses are based on the average of their political rights and civil liberties scores.

- Free: 1 to 2.5
- Partly Free: 3.0 to 5.0
- Not Free: 5.5 to 7.0

[200] Until 1978, Freedom House's annual report on this subject was titled *The Comparative Study of Freedom*.

[201] Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2018 Methodology," https://freedomhouse.org/report/methodology-freedom-world-2018.

[202] Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2018 Methodology," https://freedomhouse.org/report/methodology-freedom-world-2018.

Background on the Economist Intelligence Unit's *Democracy Index*

The Economist Intelligence Unit's (EIU's) *Democracy Index* began coverage in 2006; new reports were issued biannually until the report covering 2010, and have been issued on an annual basis since then. EIU's index is based on an array of 60 indicators, some of which are may be at the outer bounds of democracy's core definition. For instance, its political participation category includes indicators that measure rates of participation in political parties or political nongovernmental organizations, the rate at which adults follow politics in the news, and public confidence in the government and political parties, among other measures. In addition to assessments by experts, many indicators are also determined by public opinion surveys, such as the *World Values Survey* and others. For example, an indicator in the political participation category measuring citizens' political engagement uses a measure of the "percentage of people who are very or somewhat interested in politics" as measured by the World Values Survey, if available.

Democracy Index's Methodology at a Glance

Number of Countries Evaluated (2017): 165, and 2 territories; excludes "microstates" with less than 500,000 people

A country's **democracy score** ranges from 0 to 10 and corresponds with five **regime types**:

- Full democracy (8 to 10)
- Flawed democracy (6 to 8)
- Hybrid regime (4 to 6)
- Authoritarian regime (0 to 4)

A country's democracy score is determined by averaging scores for **five categories:**

- Electoral process and pluralism (based on 12 indicators)
- Functioning of government (14 indicators)
- Political participation (9 indicators)
- Political culture (8 indicators)
- Civil Liberties (17 indicators)

Other Democracy Indexes

Numerous other democracy-related indexes and databases, some expansive in scope and others focused on particular regions or on particular components of democracy, are also used by policymakers and scholars. A relatively new global democracy measure, the Varieties of Democracy Project, or V-Dem, consists of over 350 indicators covering five indexes associated with differing conceptions of democracy. Another measure, Polity IV, is frequently cited in the academic literature and has been characterized as a relatively minimalist measure that focuses on procedural aspects of democracy. Despite this, it has been shown to be highly correlated with Freedom House's measure; this correlation is attenuated when countries at the democratic/authoritarian extreme are excluded, indicating (sometimes wide) disagreement over more middling countries.[203] Other major indexes or aggregation of indexes include (but are not limited to) Freedom House's Nations in Transit report, the Bertelsmann Transformation Index, the Electoral Integrity Project, The World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators (particularly

[203] Seva Gunitsky, "Lost in the gray zone: competing measures of democracy in the former Soviet republics," in *Ranking the World: Grading States as a Tool of Global Governance* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 113-150.

the Voice and Accountability indicators), and International IDEA's Global State of Democracy report.

Critiques of Global Democracy Indexes

Experts note that different indexes are organized around overlapping but different conceptions of democracy, and they sometime disagree widely on the state of democracy in a particular country, especially with regard to middling "hybrid regimes." Differences between indexes may also be exacerbated by the use of differing sources and methods of evaluation, differing and contested aggregation methods, the selection of flawed or redundant indicators, flaws or inconsistencies related to the use of expert coding, and other factors. Some have also argued that popular indexes may suffer from ideological biases or may sometimes favor advocacy at the expense of scientific rigor. Organizations that produce the indexes have emphasized processes designed to reduce political bias and ensure methodological rigor.[204] CRS does not endorse the value or accuracy of any particular index.

[204] For detailed analysis and critiques of the methodology of many of the major democracy indexes, see Seva Gunitsky, "Lost in the gray zone: competing measures of democracy in the former Soviet republics," in *Ranking the World: Grading States as a Tool of Global Governance* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 113-150; and Michael Coppedge et al., "Conceptualizing and Measuring Democracy: A New Approach" *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 9, no. 2 (June 2011), pp. 247-267.

Appendix B. Selected CRS Reports

This appendix presents a list of selected CRS reports that are referenced elsewhere in this report or that include significant discussions of democracy-related developments in a particular region or country context.

- CRS Report R44858, *Democracy Promotion: An Objective of U.S. Foreign Assistance*, by Marian L. Lawson and Susan B. Epstein
- CRS Report R44891, *U.S. Role in the World: Background and Issues for Congress*, by Ronald O'Rourke and Michael Moodie
- CRS Report R44775, *Russia: Background and U.S. Policy*, by Cory Welt
- CRS Report R41007, *Understanding China's Political System*, by Susan V. Lawrence and Michael F. Martin
- CRS Report R44897, *Human Rights in China and U.S. Policy: Issues for the 115th Congress*, by Thomas Lum
- CRS Report R45200, *Internet Freedom in China: U.S. Government Activity, Private Sector Initiatives, and Issues of Congressional Interest*, by Patricia Moloney Figliola
- CRS Report R44037, *Cambodia: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Thomas Lum
- CRS Report R43132, *Human Rights, Civil Unrest, and Political Reform in Burma in 2013*, by Michael F. Martin
- CRS Report R44017, *Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies*, by Kenneth Katzman
- CRS Report R44793, *Sub-Saharan Africa: Key Issues, Challenges, and U.S. Responses*, by Nicolas Cook et al.
- CRS Report R43166, *Democratic Republic of Congo: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Alexis Arieff
- CRS Report R45120, *Latin America and the Caribbean: Issues in the 115th Congress*, coordinated by Mark P. Sullivan
- CRS Report R44841, *Venezuela: Background and U.S. Relations*, coordinated by Clare Ribando Seelke
- CRS Report R44822, *Cuba: U.S. Policy in the 115th Congress*, by Mark P. Sullivan
- CRS Report R43888, *Cuba Sanctions: Legislative Restrictions Limiting the Normalization of Relations*, by Dianne E. Rennack and Mark P. Sullivan
- CRS Report R43311, *Iran: U.S. Economic Sanctions and the Authority to Lift Restrictions*, by Dianne E. Rennack
- CRS Report R43521, *U.S. International Broadcasting: Background and Issues for Reform*, by Matthew C. Weed
- CRS Report RL32427, *Millennium Challenge Corporation*, by Curt Tarnoff

Author Information

Michael A. Weber
Analyst in Foreign Affairs

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.