

SUPPORTING DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS AND RULE OF LAW
"Focusing the Presidential Debates" Initiative
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Why Promoting Democracy is Important

Most of the problems facing the world today originate from countries with non-democratic systems of government and/or from extremist non-state actors that seek to blunt the advance of democracy. They view the spread of freedom and systems rooted in rule of law as threats to their own hold on/grab for power. From Russia's invasion of Ukraine (including the first annexation of one European country's territory by another since World War II) and now its military move into Syria, China's muscle-flexing in the South China Sea and cyber-attacks against the U.S., and the danger of a nuclear-weapons capable Iran to terrorism from the Islamic State or Al Qaeda, we face significant threats to our interests and to our values.

Russia, China and Iran are corrupt, authoritarian regimes that show no respect for their own people's human rights. How a regime treats its own people is often indicative of how it will behave in foreign policy. Thus, we should not be surprised when Vladimir Putin violates the sovereignty and territorial integrity of his neighbors, whether Georgia in 2008 or Ukraine in 2014 to the present, in light of the worst crackdown on human rights inside Russia since the break-up of the Soviet Union. Nor should we be shocked by threats from the Iranian regime to destroy the state of Israel or its support for the Assad regime in Syria, given that Iranians are subject to the whims of the mullahs. And under President Xi Jinping, China has increased use of the death penalty and gone after bloggers, lawyers and others amid a deteriorating human rights situation while simultaneously throwing its weight around in the Asia-Pacific region.

By contrast, we have few problems – certainly none comparable to those with authoritarian regimes – with countries that are democratic, respect human rights and observe rule of law. Accordingly, it is in U.S. national interests to advance the cause of democracy, human rights and rule of law around the world. After all, the United States is safer and more prosperous in a more democratic world and should take the lead in advancing this cause. Getting other governments to respect universal values and promote democratic development advances the cause of freedom and also mitigates the challenges we face. Free nations are also more economically successful, stable, reliable partners, and democratic societies are less likely to produce terrorists, proliferate weapons of mass destruction, or engage in aggression and war. This means that the advance of democracy benefits not just the U.S., but order and peace around the globe.

For nine straight years, freedom has been in decline, according to Freedom House's *Freedom in the World 2015* report. "More aggressive tactics by authoritarian regimes and an upsurge in terrorist attacks contributed to a disturbing decline in global freedom in 2014," Freedom House argues. According to the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL), between 2004 and 2010, more than 50 countries considered or enacted measures restricting civil society. This overall decline in freedom means a more dangerous and unstable world.

And yet despite recent disturbing developments and trends, it is important to understand that the state of democracy in the world has improved over the past several decades. In 1972, according to Freedom House, there were 44 countries rated as “free.” Today, there are 89 countries in that category. The establishment of democracy is not a short-term proposition. It takes time and commitment by those fighting for it, and the process is not necessarily a linear one. The United States has had democracy for nearly 250 years, and we are still perfecting it, so we cannot expect other countries, especially those without democratic traditions or history, to get it right the first time. Ask the citizens of Mongolia, Tunisia, Poland, or Serbia whether the United States has helped them in their path toward democracy, and the answer is likely to be a resounding yes.

America’s Unique Role

For decades, the United States has supported democracy, human rights and rule of law around the world. The United States was founded on the principles of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, and Americans believe that all people should enjoy these rights. We do not seek to impose the American model on other countries; each country, if given the opportunity, will develop in its own unique way. But we stand with and support those forces in countries around the globe who seek to build democratic societies that allow people to live in freedom, lead to greater economic success, better protect intellectual property rights, and provide a more stable investment environment. Given the option, most people around the world would choose to live in free societies. According to the most recent World Values Survey, more than 82% of respondents believe having a democratic system of government is a good thing.

Democracy advocates and human rights defenders look to the U.S. for moral, financial, and political leadership and support, making American leadership indispensable. Remaining silent or reducing the profile of these issues abandons people who, in many cases, sacrifice their liberty and lives struggling for a more democratic society.

We need to elevate democracy promotion, human rights and rule of law to a prominent place on the American foreign policy agenda by supporting indigenous forces and helping create space for them to work within their own country. We should seek to promote universal values – freedoms of expression, assembly, association, and religion – and partner with other democracies, both those with a history of freedom and those who have more recently transitioned, to strengthen efforts to spread these universal values. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, defined the terms “fundamental freedoms” and “human rights.” These include rights and freedoms of association, religion, speech, and assembly – many of which are still lacking or limited in many other countries.

Thus, we should support:

- Rule of law and accountability
- Separation of powers, an independent judiciary, and checks-and-balances,
- Free, fair, and competitive elections and political party development,
- Respect for women’s rights,

- A diverse and independent media, including internet freedom,
- A vibrant civil society,
- Democratic governance and representative, functional institutions,
- Respect and tolerance for minority groups and for religious freedom, and
- Protection of property rights.

Promoting these universal values, rights and rule of law involves training, building capacity, helping to establish systems of democratic governance, and fostering dialogue, both in countries that are struggling to establish democracy and those that are led by opponents of democracy. Supporting democratic forces, however, is only part of the equation, albeit a large part. We also should push back against the authoritarian challenge by imposing consequences on those involved in serious human rights abuses. Unless authoritarian leaders incur costs for their antidemocratic actions, they will see no reason to change their behavior. The United States government has many tools at its disposal both to assist those who are struggling for freedom and to pressure anti-democratic forces to change their behavior. These tools exist across many areas of U.S. foreign policy, from diplomatic tools and military assistance to trade agreements and economic partnerships. As much as possible, these tools should be leveraged in a coordinated manner with like-minded democracies to support those fighting for democratic change in countries around the world.

Recent Disappointments

After finding no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq following the invasion of that country in 2003, the Bush administration sought to bring democracy to Iraq, an effort that has largely failed. The freedom agenda of President Bush, while admirable in its rhetoric and aspiration, was troubled by inconsistent implementation. Influenced by that experience, Barack Obama told the *Washington Post* editorial board five days before his inauguration as president in January 2009 that he did not support promoting democracy “through the barrel of a gun.”

His implicit criticism of the Bush administration’s efforts to promote democracy in Iraq and Afghanistan has evolved into a broader reluctance over the past nearly seven years to promote democracy and human rights around the world—see, for example, his administration’s reaction to and handling of the Green Movement in Iran in June 2009, the Arab Spring in 2011 and the Egypt coup of 2013, and the reluctance to meet with the Dalai Lama for fear of offending Beijing. He rarely meets with human rights and civil society activists either in Washington or during travel overseas.

The Obama administration’s public and repeated rejection of the notion of linkage with Russia—in which it made clear that Putin’s crackdown internally would have no implications on the bilateral relationship—gave the Russian leader a green light to go after his critics and opponents without worrying about paying any price for doing so. Its opposition in 2012 to the Sergei Magnitsky legislation, which passed with huge bipartisan support and imposes sanctions on Russian officials engaged in gross human rights abuses, similarly sent the wrong signal to Moscow and to Russia liberals who strongly supported such measures. In the recent nuclear accord nuclear with Iran, that

country's abysmal human rights situation never factored into the negotiations. The resumption of diplomatic relations with Cuba has largely downplayed the repression in that country as well.

Taking on the Skeptics/Realists

The Obama administration's aversion to promoting democracy and human rights is shared by some on both the left and right of the political spectrum. These "doubters" set up false choices in which policymakers would be pressured to choose promoting either our values or our interests. In fact, promoting our (or universally recognized) values advances U.S. interests, for the two really are inseparable. Supporting democracy, human rights and rule of law need not be mutually exclusive to pursuing economic and/or security interests. Indeed, we can enhance our overall interests by ensuring that democracy and human rights feature prominently in our relations with other countries.

Some will argue that it is not America's role or responsibility to tell other countries what kind of political system is in their interest, to impose our system on others, or to criticize other governments for human rights abuses, especially when we ourselves are not perfect. In fact, it *is* our business – and in our interest – to promote freedom around the world; indeed, the United States has a special obligation to help those fighting to live in freedom and those with a limited voice in their society often look to us to play that role. We do not insist that others follow the American model, and recognize that we also make mistakes, but we should urge governments to respect universal human rights and democratic principles, even while developing their own character, consistent with international covenants and agreements that they have signed. Rather than attempting to dictate the directions countries take, we are instead refusing to remain silent when peaceful political activity is crushed or made illegal.

Similarly, we hear the argument that the U.S. should focus on problems at home before going around the world lecturing others. And yet the world simply will not wait for the United States to "get our own house in order." In fact, voids in leadership would likely be filled by governments or movements that not only do not share our interests, but fight actively against them. We have to be able to do both: address our own shortcomings while supporting democracy movements and showing solidarity with human rights activists elsewhere.

What democracy promotion really means is regime change through the use of force, the critics argue. The American people do not want to devote any more resources to toppling dictators – these countries need to deal with their own problems, they add. To be clear, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were begun for reasons of national security, not to impose democracy. Once the regimes fell, the U.S. implemented its decades-old policy of supporting democratic activists internally to help them rebuild their governments; indeed, we had a responsibility to do so, for the alternative was chaos (as we've seen in Libya). Regime change must be separated from the U.S. policy – implemented for the past 30 years through the National Endowment for Democracy and associated NGOs – of helping democratic activists establish the building blocks of democracy such as the rule of law, free elections, an effective civil society, and freedom of the press. We recognize that

support for democracy can result in regime change by virtue of helping citizens find their political voice, even if that is not the primary purpose of such assistance.

Others will say that democracy is not necessary for a country to be successful – look at China or Singapore. While China and Singapore are the rare examples of countries that are doing well economically without allowing political freedom (although the bloom is off the Chinese economic rose these days), in the majority of cases, such as in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, it has only been after the establishment of democracy, or alongside it, that countries have flourished economically. China (which is experiencing both significant challenges to the Party’s monopoly on power and a disconcerting crackdown under President Xi) and Singapore are not the right models to look to – rather it is the vast majority of countries that have pursued both democracy and economic development and have succeeded.

In addition, skeptics of democracy promotion argue that attempted democratic transitions in the Arab World have only led to chaos and violence, strengthening ISIS and other terrorist groups. Some countries are simply not ready – and may never be ready -- for democracy and need authoritarian leaders to maintain stability, they claim. It’s important to get cause and effect straight: the chaos and violence are not due to democracy promotion efforts but rather to the legacy of decades of dictatorship, oppression, and lack of opportunity. Without democratic traditions to fall back on, it is more challenging and takes more time for certain nations to establish themselves as stable democracies. Rather than shying away from supporting these efforts, we should be more engaged, providing much-needed training and examples from not only the United States, but preferably from countries that have been through democratic transitions far more recently like Poland or the Czech Republic and, one hopes, Tunisia.

There are always going to be skeptics when it comes to promoting democracy, fundamental human rights and rule of law around the world. The bottom line, however, is that supporting these causes is both morally the right thing to do and in the United States’ best interests –economically and with regard to our national security.

As President Ronald Reagan said in his address to Members of the British Parliament on June 8, 1982 “We must be staunch in our conviction that freedom is not the sole prerogative of a lucky few, but the inalienable and universal right of all human beings.”

** - This paper is adapted from work done by the Democracy & Human Rights Working Group, a nonpartisan initiative bringing together academic and think tank experts and practitioners from NGOs and previous Democratic and Republican administrations, seeking to elevate the importance of democracy and human rights issues in U.S. foreign policy. That group is convened by Arizona State University's McCain Institute for International Leadership, and David Kramer is co-chair of the group.*