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What Future for International Democracy Support?

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Contents

Summary

Severe disruption hit the realm of international democracy support in the first half of this year. The Donald Trump administration's radical deconstruction of U.S. aid and policies relating to democracy abroad was the major driver of disruption, but pressures and troubles in many other parts of the world also roiled the field. This disruption, which comes on top of many accumulated problems and challenges for such work, is forcing a painful but needed rethinking of democracy support. This paper offers some preliminary ideas about what such a rethinking might entail.

Part One details the current wave of disruption hitting democracy support—both the actions of the Trump administration and adverse developments among other Western democracy donors, U.S. private funders, and multilateral institutions.

Part Two examines the larger international political context in which this disruption has unfolded. It highlights two trends: first, the rising assertiveness of authoritarian powers, especially China and Russia, in bolstering other authoritarian states, undermining democracy's appeal, and supporting antidemocratic actors and ideas within established democracies; and second, the weakening of democracies from within.

Part Three identifies and explores six major challenges central to reimagining and renovating international democracy support:

1. **New leadership and enhanced coordination:** With the United States stepping back from its longtime role as the largest, most powerful backer of global democracy, new forms of leadership and coordination on democracy support are critical.

2. **Greater strategic differentiation and prioritization:** The varied global landscape of democratic maladies necessitates more differentiated strategies for democracy work. It also points to the need for pro-democracy actors to prioritize more clearly among countries and themes.

3. **Bridging the West-rest divide:** It is past time to move beyond the outdated idea that democracy support is clearly divided between providers and recipients, and substantially amplify two-way, mutually supportive approaches to democratic collaboration.

4. **New narratives and models:** Global democratic disruption has underlined the urgency of the growing quest for more effective narratives relating both to the value of democracy and to the nature and legitimacy of democracy support. With the search for new narratives must also come greater openness to new debates and ideas about alternative models of democracy.

5. **New methods:** Operating in a seriously constrained funding landscape puts a premium on forging new methods of democracy support that prioritize coalition- and alliance-building, knowledge-sharing, local resourcing, and alternative forms of civic organization.

6. **Debating democracy support without democracy:** New debates are emerging over whether it is time to detach democracy support from the use of democracy as an organizing framework and instead concentrate on incorporating democracy topics into alternative or broader issue areas.

It is daunting to imagine how global democracy can be effectively supported as the United States retreats from the field and other major democracies step back from vital aid commitments. Yet reimagining and reinvention are possible—necessity can be turned into opportunity.

Introduction

Going into 2025, the United States was the largest provider of aid to support democracy internationally.[1] But funding was only a part of the story. U.S. diplomatic engagement, economic carrots and sticks, and military support were additional key elements of America's long-standing role as the most powerful global defender of democracy—however inconsistent and rhetorically overinflated this role often was in practice. Almost immediately upon coming to power, Trump and his team took a wrecking ball to the funding, institutional architecture, and diplomacy that the United States had built up over more than fifty years to support democracy globally. Their actions demoralized countless democratic activists abroad, heartened autocrats in multiple regions, and sent a shock wave throughout the community of governmental, multilateral, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) dedicated to supporting democracy internationally.

No one who cares about freedom and human flourishing would have wished for this turn of events. And yet, it is forcing a needed rethinking of democracy support. Despite tens of billions of dollars and euros of democracy aid, countless pro-democratic diplomatic initiatives by engaged governments, and extensive pro-democracy advocacy in and by international institutions, autocracies have been hardening and democracies have been weakening for two decades. This does not mean all this activity was pointless—but it does indicate that it was inadequate. The traditional methods of supporting democracy transnationally have not undergone a wholesale reconsideration since the field first gained momentum in the 1990s. The practices that took hold in those early years were only partially and inconsistently rethought and revised as a global democratic recession steadily replaced the once-inspiring global democratic expansion. As cases of democratic backsliding and reversal multiplied during the past twenty years, democracy supporters seemed always to

be on the back foot, scrambling to adjust to the punishing new global political realities and rarely finding the time or the will to come together as a community to figure out why they were falling short and how to up their game. Even without the seismic changes of this year, the field needed critical reflection and renovation.

This paper aims to contribute some ideas and analysis to a rapidly emerging set of conversations and debates in many quarters about what such a renovation might look like.[2] Part One of the paper outlines the massive disruption that has occurred in this field in the first half of 2025, reviewing developments in the United States but also across the wider democracy support community. Part Two examines the fraught global political context in which this disruption is occurring. Part Three sets out six major issues that should be central to a deep-reaching stocktaking and regeneration of the democracy support field.

Part One: A Disrupted Domain

Abrupt, sweeping, and severe disruption hit international democracy support in the first half of this year. The Trump administration's radical deconstruction of aid and policies relating to democracy abroad was the major driver of disruption, but pressures and troubles in other parts of the world also roiled the field.

The Bonfire of U.S. Democracy Aid

As part of its massive cuts to U.S. foreign assistance, including the dismantling of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Trump administration has eliminated what likely amounts to more than 80 percent of U.S. democracy aid.[3] Some small amounts of such aid are still flowing from the State Department and the National Endowment for Democracy, but the future of both of these sources is highly uncertain.[4] The administration has also taken an axe to U.S. global broadcasting—a vital element of democracy support—including dismantling Voice of America.[5] The Millennium Challenge Corporation, which has been a useful additional source of democracy support through its use of good governance conditionality, appears to be in the process of being dismantled as well.[6] It is possible that in the months ahead, Congress will reassert control over its budgetary powers and try to preserve or even increase democracy funding from its new extremely low point, but the animus that the Trump administration has expressed toward aid generally and democracy aid in particular makes this only a speculative possibility.[7]

This bonfire of democracy aid has devastated the community of U.S. NGOs that have been at the forefront of democracy programs internationally for decades, such as the International Republican Institute, the National Democratic Institute, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, Freedom House, Internews, the Center for International

Private Enterprise, and others. They have had to close scores of international offices, end most of their programs, and fire large percentages of their staff.[8] Development consulting firms that have worked extensively on democracy programs for decades have also been hit very hard. The cuts have also damaged the hundreds, and perhaps thousands, of non-U.S. organizations around the world that were supported by U.S. funding.[9] Human rights groups, independent media organizations, women's groups, election observing groups, anti-corruption organizations, and other pro-democracy civic organizations in multiple regions are gasping for funds and protection. Hundreds of human rights defenders under direct threat are now in grave danger, with safe houses previously supported through U.S. funding suddenly closed and evacuation routes blocked.[10] The shattering of trust from some of the world's bravest people, who fought repressive governments for the cause of freedom and counted on the United States to have their backs, is devastating. Even if some funding is eventually restored, partners who have dedicated their lives to this cause will not forget that this could happen again. They may be reluctant to resume their work with the United States, and if they do, it will be with deep hesitation.

Broader U.S. Withdrawal

The crippling of U.S. democracy aid is just part of the Trump administration's larger withdrawal from America's long-standing international role as a defender of democracy. From the 1940s onward, the United States played a vital part in advancing democracy's global fortunes. While its complex mix of foreign policy interests led to numerous inconsistencies in fulfilling this role, the United States marshalled enormous diplomatic, economic, and military resources to bolster democratic allies and aspirants. Its backing provided democracies under external threat a degree of deterrence against assertive authoritarian regimes. Its diplomatic policies worked to slow or mitigate the actions of democratically backsliding leaders and support fledgling democratic transitions. Its engagement in multilateral institutions helped secure a wider embrace of democratic norms across diverse regions. Its refugee assistance created a haven for dissidents from many countries.

The United States also helped organize and lead other countries in upholding a global system that favored democratic norms. International efforts to organize around democracy-related issues in technology, trade sanctions, anti-corruption legislation, and other related domains were occasionally spearheaded by European nations, but more often the work was done by the much larger U.S. diplomatic corps. U.S. diplomats frequently rounded up votes in multilateral bodies in support of democracy. At times, U.S. military partnership was brought to bear in useful ways—such as in pressuring the Brazilian military to remain supportive of democracy and not back Jair Bolsonaro's attempted coup in the run-up to Brazil's 2022 elections.[11] In other cases, the United States shored up democratic countries directly. For instance, its military and economic aid, together with Europe's, have helped prevent Ukraine's democratic aspirations from being extinguished.

America's retreat in these diplomatic and security spheres will weaken democracy worldwide. Ambitious autocratic regimes such as China will step up their diplomatic engagements to spread their pro-autocratic influence more widely. Thomas Carothers and Oliver Stuenkel have described how Trump's actions have emboldened antidemocratic leaders and inspired copycat actions in other countries. For instance, Elon Musk's declaration that USAID was a criminal organization opened the door for Hungary, Serbia, and Slovakia to launch investigations, raids, and even criminal charges against organizations that had accepted USAID money.[12]

Meanwhile, reductions in U.S. diplomatic support may undermine the morale of activists, harming their own bottom-up efforts at change. For many people willing to put themselves in harm's way to fight for their countries' freedom, a sense that the United States was behind them provided an intangible sense of security. Knowing that the United States would likely provide refuge to them or to their loved ones if their governments cracked down on them gave democratic activists a safety net. Now, the perception that they stand alone in their fight may lead democracy advocates to pare back their efforts.

On the Side of Autocrats

The Trump administration has not only retreated from democracy by cutting aid and de-emphasizing pro-democracy diplomacy—it is now actively putting a thumb on the scale for authoritarianism by reducing fundamental rights at home, boosting illiberal or antidemocratic governments and political figures abroad, and siding against liberalism in international bodies.

At home, the Trump administration has begun attacking independent media—including interfering with syndicated wire services that are relied on worldwide for their global coverage.[13] It is using tools pioneered in other backsliding democracies to try to force obeisance from businesses, law firms, universities, and other types of NGOs. It is attacking judges who rule against it and avoiding compliance with judicial rulings it dislikes.[14] Even though the judiciary frequently pushes back on the administration's unlawful actions, the fact that the administration has taken such actions at all—and excoriated the courts for resisting them—gives global authoritarians cover to do the same with no fear of U.S. rebuke.[15]

Indeed, the Trump administration is now in lockstep with authoritarians in several domains. It has broadcast that it will excise coverage in the annual State Department Human Rights Reports of a number of fundamental rights, such as privacy intrusions.[16] In addition to crippling Voice of America, the administration has signaled that it will have the far-right One America News Network provide content for the outlet.[17] Senior administration officials have expressed support for illiberal, right-wing parties or politicians in other countries, such as Vice President JD Vance speaking in Munich on behalf of the Alternative for Germany party and Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem calling on Polish voters to support the right-wing presidential candidate during a trip to Poland shortly before its presidential

runoff election in May.[18] On the international institutional front, the United States has used its seat in the United Nations to challenge gender equity language at the Commission for the Status of Women and to vote against rebuking Russia's war against Ukraine in the General Assembly.[19]

The cumulative effects over time of the administration's global repositioning of America on democracy are certain to be significant. Yet it is worth remembering that U.S. democracy support has long been an imperfect and often flawed enterprise. Most intensive U.S. efforts to support democratic trajectories have been confined to weaker countries. High-level U.S. political support for democratic reform has always been much more tempered for countries willing to ally with the United States geopolitically, whether the shared enemy was communism, the global war on terror, emigration, or, more recently, competition with China. Even former president Joe Biden's administration—a self-proclaimed friend of democracy—failed to forthrightly support human rights in many cases, such as not using sanctions effectively against Iran during the huge women's movement there for democracy.[20] The loss of U.S. support for democracy under Trump is immense. But it is important to simultaneously retain some perspective: It is not as devastating as an idealized history of that support might suggest.

Private U.S. Funders

In response to the new U.S. context, some private U.S. funders are increasing their funding for democracy issues. However, the majority of their new funding is, quite understandably, focused at home, on protecting U.S. democracy.[21] Others, fearing retribution from the administration, have paused funding decisions altogether to avoid controversy. A few foundations that once gave to the sector have quietly pared down their democracy portfolios. Overall, only a handful of major U.S. foundations are now significantly engaged in support for democracy or human rights abroad. As important as they are, their resources are limited and subject to new pressures from an administration that seems determined to constrain and punish private philanthropy.

Corporate foundations in the United States are being more circumspect in their support for democracy organizations, wary of drawing the ire of an administration that has shown its willingness to exact significant business costs for activities it dislikes. Universities that had previously offered in-kind support, such as fellowships for democracy-activist scholars from other countries, face new financial pressures as a result of the administration's unprecedented attacks on universities. They may be more inhibited about accepting persons into such programs whom they worry may be targeted by the administration, and they face the broader possibility of strict limitations on visas for foreign students or visitors.

Individual U.S. philanthropists may ramp up their support—though, like foundations, they are mostly oriented toward democracy issues at home. What support they do provide for democracy work abroad is not connected to U.S. diplomatic activities and thus does

not get the benefit of a mutual reinforcing tie between aid and diplomacy that was often an important positive feature of official U.S. democracy aid. Even if they are willing to increase support, they will have to grapple with the realities of ideological polarization.[22] U.S. private donors are part of a polarized domestic political landscape, and democracy organizations trying to raise funds from them risk being pulled into polarized positions—whether by left-leaning donors looking to amplify criticism of U.S. political developments or by right-leaning donors who want to see a focus on Chinese authoritarianism, and who balk at critiques of the United States or of right-leaning, illiberal friends in Europe. Greater reliance on private funding could thus pull U.S. democracy support organizations into separate left- and right-leaning camps, undercutting the largely bipartisan and collegial partnerships that have traditionally characterized their work.

European Echoes

Although the rest of the wide-ranging field of international democracy support is not experiencing U.S.-style disruption, uncertainties and troubles are mounting. European aid budgets are under serious pressure, both as a result of the urgent push to increase funding for military budgets to make up for the leaky U.S. security umbrella and because of political pressures from right-leaning parties skeptical about aid. Major aid cuts have been announced in France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, cuts that will almost certainly reduce funding for democracy programs.[23] European Commission aid—the largest source of European democracy funding—is under severe pressure in the negotiations for the European Union's (EU) new multi-year budget.[24] Some European funders have tried to plug some of the immediate holes left by the U.S. democracy aid cuts, but they are only able to cover a small part of what has been lost. A few democracies are looking to do more. Switzerland, for example, is increasing its commitment to supporting democracy through diplomacy and aid.[25] But even when these smaller donors do step up, they cannot make up for the massive reductions by the United States and other large donors.

Multilateral Uncertainties

While numerous multilateral organizations beyond the European Union remain engaged in democracy support, they also face increased pressures and uncertainties. The Trump administration has already reduced funding to multiple UN bodies, such as the United Nations Development Programme, and is likely to institute more funding reductions over time. Some regional organizations suffer from political pressures within the regions where they operate, like the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States grappling with burgeoning military coups in the Sahel and the Organization of American States constricted by the intensified right-left polarization in Latin American multilateral affairs. More generally, China and other authoritarian powers are continuing to increase their influence throughout the multilateral domain, using that influence to negate or reduce the work of institutions on any issues relating to democracy. Multilateral groups or initiatives

that specifically focus on democracy or democracy-adjacent issues, like the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) and the Open Government Partnership, continue to do valuable work, but they also face new funding pressures and cannot substitute for high-level political commitment from governments. The Summit for Democracy process that was initiated by the Biden administration delivered relatively little and is now moribund. Small groupings of countries have organized some minilateral initiatives—Spain and Brazil, for example, ran a "Defending Democracy" forum at the United Nations in 2024—but these have not resulted in tangible new democracy support.

Part Two: The Fraught Larger Context

The disruption, pressure, and uncertainty roiling the field of international democracy support is occurring within an international political context in which democracy is increasingly contested and rife with negative cross-currents. Gone are the years in which international democracy supporters carried out their activities with relatively little sense of competition from authoritarian powers or with a sense of confidence about the health and appeal of democracy generally.

Autocracy Promotion

In recent years, China and Russia—the world's strongest autocracies—have hardened domestically while stepping up wide-ranging efforts to exert antidemocratic political influence across borders:

- **Bolstering other authoritarian states against challenges from internal democratic movements.** As many analysts have detailed, some assertive authoritarian countries, especially Russia and China, are helping other authoritarians, no matter what differences of ideological outlook may exist among them.[26] Using economic, diplomatic, military, and intelligence powers, they fortify regimes that once would have been toppled by people power movements, such as those in Belarus and Venezuela.

- **Undermining democracy's appeal in less strong democracies.** Massive information operations pursued primarily by Russia and China are advancing narratives that paint democratic countries as violent, ungovernable places to live, while portraying their own countries as fair and courageous.[27] Anti-U.S. sentiment and greater disillusionment with democratic governance worldwide have created amenable audiences.[28] This propaganda is having an impact on populations in Africa, Latin America, and many other parts of the world. Meanwhile, some

authoritarian countries are gaining support from the governments of countries that once were considered nascent democracy supporters themselves, like Brazil, India, and Türkiye.[29]

- **Supporting politicians, organizations, and parties within democracies that are friendly to authoritarian states.** In 2022, a declassified U.S. intelligence report highlighted Russia spending $300 million to assist political parties in approximately twenty other countries.[30] This spending has targeted parties on the right, including loans to France's National Front and attempted support for Italy's Lega party and Austria's Freedom Party, but has also financed some left-leaning parties and politicians, such as a Latvian Green Party member of parliament.[31] This Russian support aims to polarize democracies while also generating Russian sympathizers within individual countries and in institutions like NATO and the European Parliament. Russia has also deployed disinformation to help shore up coup leaders in Africa, such as in Burkina Faso.[32] Various studies have also unearthed Chinese financial support for pro-China politicians and parties in democracies such as Australia and Canada, as well as Chinese infiltration of universities and media in multiple democracies.[33]

- **Deepening the polarization of consolidated democracies to undercut their social cohesion and governability.** Authoritarian powers supporting polarizing political parties within democracies complement such efforts with information operations aimed at polarizing citizenries.[34] Iran, for example, was caught sending intimidating emails to U.S. voters—a particularly worrisome case because information operations that normalize violence may be playing a significant role in enhancing political violence in democracies with strong militaries.[35] In multiple countries, efforts do not stop at words: Russia has provided material support to separatist movements from Texas to Spain, political organizations that spout pro-Russia views, and some violent groups, such as biker gangs in Europe.[36] Such efforts identify cooperative entry points within domestic populations, then build on these existing bases. Such propaganda becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy by aggravating the difficulties of governing fractious, polarized, and increasingly violent societies.

China and Russia are not the only authoritarian powers working assiduously to extend their transnational political influence, often in ways that support undemocratic governments and outcomes. The Gulf states—especially Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—Iran, Türkiye, and Venezuela are all significant players. These influences are especially on the rise in Africa. In Sudan, for example, the UAE has emerged as the most active external actor in the country's civil war, heavily supporting the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces in their fight against the government and thus exacerbating an extremely destructive conflict.[37]

Democracies Weakening from Within

The penetration of democratic countries by externally promoted authoritarian ideas is being enabled by changes within democracies, including the weakening of democracy's attractiveness to voters and the emergence of elected leaders who are eroding once-stable democracies from the top.

Growing susceptibility to authoritarian penetration. After World War Two, Soviet-supported organizations often tried to gain influence within democracies. But in most Western democracies, "useful idiots" and front groups for totalitarian ideologies operated at the margins of political life. By the later decades of the twentieth century, totalitarian states were economically weak and their ideologies rarely had a strong presence within democratic states.

In the twenty-first century, however, consolidated democracies are more susceptible to authoritarian penetration. This vulnerability is undermining a united front both at home and internationally. As described above, antidemocratic propaganda from assertive autocracies targets citizens in many democracies. Meanwhile, political parties that receive support from the Kremlin or China may be more hesitant to speak against these countries in international forums and may even support their foreign policy goals. Formerly democratic countries that are members of NATO or the EU but have strong links to China, Iran, Russia, or other non-democratic states may also act as weak links. They can make these groupings less strategic and less able to work cohesively on behalf of democracy.

Ideas are not the only problem. Monetary interlinkage is also a growing factor. Business leaders with dealings in kleptocratic and authoritarian states are often loath to speak out against their antidemocratic practices. For instance, Hollywood has balked for years at making movies in which China is portrayed critically for fear of being cut off from the Chinese market.[38] Similarly, businesses may avoid criticizing authoritarian moves by elected leaders because they hope to maintain their business interests in those countries. This has been the case with German car manufacturers in Hungary across its many years of democratic backsliding, as well as with international banks operating in Hong Kong as China has tightened the screws starting in 2020.[39]

Waning soft power. At the end of the twentieth century, democracy benefited from its cultural attractiveness to many people around the globe. That power is now greatly diminished.

In the early 1990s, becoming democratic was associated with economic success. That narrative has been undermined by China, which has grown relatively wealthy without democracy and has aggressively exported its development model. China's model is particularly attractive to corrupt or authoritarian leaders, who use it to claim to their populations that there is a way to bring about development without reducing their own power or perks. The "elephant curve," put forward in the 2010s by economist Branko Milanovic highlighting the unequal effects of globalization on income distribution,

threw into question the association of economic growth with democracy: The economic globalization of the 1990s and early 2000s helped upper middle classes globally but left lower middle classes in developed democracies behind, creating backlash effects.[40]

In many cases, peoples' experiences with crime, oligarchy, corruption, and other maladies and frustrations in countries attempting democratic transitions have taken a toll on their support for democracy—particularly when populations were told they were experiencing the birth pangs of democracy when they were actually living under newly forming systems of oligarchy and state capture.

Frustration with how democracy is working in practice is also apparent in the United States and Europe, particularly among the most politically engaged youth, making it hard for Western democracy promoters to project a confident image to those struggling to attain such a system.[41] While majorities in Western democracies are still pro-democratic, other political ideas are gaining support and intensity. A transatlantic, conservative, illiberal movement is reducing support for inalienable rights for minority populations, suggesting that majoritarianism or even strongman rule are preferable ways of creating cohesive community life. A neo-reactionary movement promulgated by tech "visionaries" such as Curtis Yarvin preaches monarchy and an end to democracy, and has a surprisingly strong following among technologists and even elite U.S. students.[42] In the United States, the most politically active young people are the most likely to support political violence.[43] These swirling economic, political, and intellectual currents make Western democracies less attractive to many around the world.

Part Three: Finding New Ways Forward

The international democracy support community is reeling from the severe disruption of the past six months. Yet despite all the damage and demoralization, a wide-ranging community of organizations engaged in supporting democracy across borders remains active on many fronts. It is a community comprised of foreign ministries, aid agencies, multilateral institutions, philanthropic foundations, specialized democracy support organizations, development aid implementing organizations, governmental-nongovernmental partnerships and alliances, pro-democracy nongovernmental coalitions, and regional and national NGOs. Even though many in this community are stunned by the disruption around them, they are acutely aware of the need to find ways to grasp the new reality and move forward.

The challenges are enormous; the agenda is urgent. Compounding the magnitude and complexity of this task is the fact that this disruption comes on top of many years of accumulated shortcomings in democracy support that were often downplayed out of fear of questioning, and thus potentially undermining, the overall enterprise. These issues include poorly performing strategies, outdated methods, and legacy assumptions about models,

narratives, and values. In stark terms, over the past twenty years, Western democracy supporters have invested tens of billions of dollars and euros, and enormous amounts of diplomatic and human capital trying to support people working for democracy in their own countries—yet all the while, democracy has steadily retreated worldwide. Clearly, fundamental issues about democracy support and its future need to be faced and honestly debated.

Given the breadth and diversity of the international democracy support landscape, no single set of questions, guidelines, or proposals will stretch evenly or fully across this loosely defined and largely uncoordinated community. Given this fact, this paper focuses on identifying a core set of widely shared issues that need to be addressed to move forward out of the current disruption and uncertainty. Six groups of issues stand out: leadership and coordination, strategic differentiation and prioritization, the West-rest divide, narratives and models, methods, and overall framing.

New Leadership and Enhanced Coordination

A central challenge is how the international democracy support community can respond to the sudden and likely prolonged withdrawal of U.S. leadership on democracy support. The United States' role as democratic reference point, largest funder, diplomatic heavyweight, and agenda-setter anchored the whole enterprise of democracy support from its origins. For decades, other Western and non-Western democracies have often bristled at U.S. dominance, but they also accepted or acceded to its predominant role and in fact expected U.S. leadership on many democracy issues.

The leadership vacuum presents hard questions for other governments committed to democracy support. Will they move into a higher gear? Or, conversely, could the turnabout in U.S. policy make them question their own democratic commitments and conclude that democracy support is no longer viable without America's weight behind it? Those that do decide to step up will need to explore and embrace new, more targeted forms of leadership, such as at sectoral and thematic levels, and within specific regions and countries of concern. To mention just one of many possible examples, what country or countries will step up to fill the gap left by the United States having backed sharply away from its leadership role on international anti-corruption policy and aid?[44] The same question goes for media assistance and other major democracy-related sectors where Washington was previously the dominant actor but is no more.

Democracy aid providers lack a good forum to identify, debate, and resolve such leadership issues. For years, democracy aid providers have ritualistically talked about the need for greater coordination and their desire to engage in it, but action has not accompanied such talk. Democracy aid providers have sometimes managed to coordinate their work at the receiving-country level, especially within specific aid-dependent countries where donors have built some coordination capacity on aid generally. They have achieved much less coordination at the regional and international levels, outside of a few specialized areas and

mechanisms, like the Financial Action Task Force. With the United States seemingly tilting from being a pro-democracy power toward being a pro-autocracy actor, it is imperative that other governments committed to this domain get serious not just about boosting coordination but also about filling the yawning leadership gap.

A crucial step forward, therefore, would be the establishment of a coordination forum or other similar mechanism on international democracy support. It would ideally be led by a small number of governments, no more than four or five, that remain significantly involved in pro-democracy diplomacy and democracy aid. It could also include a similar number of the main democracy-oriented foundations or other democracy-related international NGOs. It would not focus on big, all-in annual gatherings—where the issue of who is invited and who is not becomes all-consuming and lowest common denominator approaches carry the day. Instead, it should take a more nimble, flexible approach of smaller, frequent meetings with highly motivated participants. It would seek to establish and maintain a big-picture map of the main strengths and lacunae of democracy support. And it would bolster the field by identifying and launching flexible sub-groups tackling specific thematic issues or countries, consistent with what analysts at the Policy Center for the New South have called "like-minded internationalism."[45]

An additional leadership issue arising in the new context is whether the moment has arrived for a recentering of democracy support away from its longtime Western base to one rooted in the Global South. In workshops and conferences where the future of the field is starting to be discussed, this idea often surfaces. This, the argument goes, should be the moment when major Global South democracies such as Brazil, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria, and South Africa step up. For some observers, this is especially true because of what they believe to be greatly reduced Western credibility on democracy issues as a result of a perceived lack of Western concern about the effects of Israeli military actions in Gaza, and the contrast between that lack and the strong Western backing for Ukraine against Russian military intervention.[46]

While the idea for a new leadership role for the Global South on democracy support may be attractive on its face, it risks becoming a hollow cliché that tantalizes but leads nowhere. Many major non-Western democracies remain deeply ambivalent about the basic idea of countries working across borders to affect other countries' political trajectory. Moreover, many are wracked by serious democratic problems of their own, having slid backward even further than the United States has, which reduces their credibility for such work. There may certainly be room for some of these governments to take part in new coordination and leadership efforts. But expecting that as a group they will effectively take up the mantle and broadly "own" international democracy support is unrealistic.

A different and perhaps more realistic way to approach the issue of a greater leadership role for the Global South is to widen the lens in two ways. First, smaller Global South democracies are more likely than the larger ones to play an active role in advancing transnational democracy support. The larger Global South democracies are the countries

most firmly attached to the paradigm of resisting what they have long seen as imperialistic pro-democratic interventionism by the West. Smaller democracies like Chile, Ghana, and Taiwan have been less at the forefront of such thinking and, in many cases, have benefited more directly from Western democracy support than the larger, non-Western democracies have. They may thus be more likely candidates for an active role in a West-rest shift. Second, there exists a vital ecosystem of Global South–based NGOs dedicated to democracy-related issues that operate regionally and cross-regionally. They are likely a more fertile source of new leadership energy and direction for international democracy support than major Global South governments.

Greater Strategic Differentiation and Prioritization

This moment of disruption requires revisiting very basic questions of strategy. This starts at the macro level of basic strategic differentiation—or the chronic lack thereof. The field of democracy support came of age at a time when only two main contexts presented themselves for attention—authoritarian regimes that appeared to be vulnerable to potentially dramatic democratic change, and transitional contexts where authoritarians had fallen and fledgling democratic systems were trying to consolidate themselves. Democracy aid providers have struggled to develop well-differentiated strategies tailored to fit an immensely varied landscape. This challenge predates the current difficulties provoked by the antidemocratic pivot of the Trump administration, but that new context makes it all the more urgent for democracy supporters to address.

There are now at least five major types of country contexts for democracy support work:

Fully authoritarian states: The authoritarian regimes that survived the third wave of democracy, such as Belarus, Egypt, or Venezuela, are now hardened politically. They are often supportive of each other and shrewd in their understanding of and ability to resist external democracy pressures. Some have genuine popular support, while others rely on repression and co-optation to stay in place. Many have developed coherent counter-narratives to democracy. In these countries, whatever electoral processes exist are functionally meaningless, and their institutions of horizontal accountability have been undermined, closing off most entry points for democracy aid beyond whatever civil society survives.

Competitive authoritarian and other hybrid regimes: A sizable number of once-democratic or transitional countries have ended up in this category as elected leaders have undercut or dismantled democratic institutions and norms, such as Hungary, India, and Türkiye. In these countries, electoral processes involving some participation by opposition forces take place, but only with many distortions and constraints. Civil society, including independent media, still has some room to operate, but it faces harsh pressures and limits. In some of these countries, violence is high, often carried out by organized, violent criminal groups that maintain close ties to official power. High levels of corruption are also common, sometimes triggering large-scale protests, but other times resulting in generalized public

fatigue with all organized political actors. In these countries, democracy supporters may face concerns from some of their partners about enabling backlash. For instance, anti-corruption or anti-violence activism can provide a pretext for governments to further centralize power. Pro-democracy protests can provide an excuse for authoritarian crackdown and retrenchment.

At-risk and early backsliding countries: Some democracies are in the early stages of democratic backsliding or are experiencing troubling political tremors from rising illiberal or antidemocratic forces. Such cases include Brazil, Indonesia, Poland, and the United States. In some of these countries, elected leaders have recently tried to undercut (or are now engaged in undercutting) institutional constraints on their power, such as through attacks on the judiciary, while seeking to delegitimize and constrain political opposition and civil society. In others, illiberal political parties or politicians are gaining strength and would clearly present a backsliding threat should they come to power. Backsliding leaders often make political polarization a primary tactic, to help divide opposition and inflate the narrative that they themselves are national saviors. Both political and civic mobilizing is still feasible in such places, and it is possible for opponents to win national elections; these two tactics together usually form the primary potential path to stopping the process of backsliding. But backsliding leaders have become adept at moving quickly, learning from each other, and attacking external efforts of democracy support as illegitimate political interventionism.

Recovery countries: Alongside the overall trend of democratic recession, a small but growing number of countries have experienced or are experiencing new democratic openings and attempted processes of democratic recovery after the electoral defeat or political collapse of a backsliding government. Bangladesh, Guatemala, and Senegal are examples. Such cases represent important opportunities for external democracy supporters, yet also face complex challenges, including unrealistically high expectations on the part of the public for rapid gains, prickly intransigence on the part of the defeated backsliders, the need to reclaim state institutions captured by the outgoing regime, high levels of political polarization, and underlying socioeconomic damage resulting from sustained periods of mismanagement and corruption.[47]

Conflict countries: Some countries once thought to be part of the third wave of democracy subsequently exited attempted democratic transitions, descending into civil conflicts that became endemic over time and were often accompanied by state breakdown. In such countries, finding ways to end protracted civil wars is the top priority, but democracy concerns are usually still on the agenda as part of conflict resolution processes aimed at making politics inclusive and representative. External democracy support faces a host of challenges in such contexts, such as operating amid high levels of violence, grappling with the lack of coherent state institutions, and engaging traumatized citizens who are terrified of the risks of political mobilization and engagement.

Sharply different democracy support strategies are needed for each of these different types of cases. Yet many democracy support organizations have been slow to move away from generic strategic frameworks that rely on old ideas about supporting a standard set of formal democratic institutions. The new, disrupted context of democracy support should be used by the democracy community as a push to question and better differentiate its strategies. Research pointing to lessons about effective strategies in different types of contexts has emerged in recent years, but these sources remain a scattered body of knowledge that democracy support organizations have only partially sought to gather and incorporate into their work.[48] For example, it is unclear whether many foreign ministries in governments that are at least formally committed to supporting democracy internationally have a clear anti-backsliding strategy at hand that they can draw upon when elected leaders start enacting policies that abridge democratic norms and institutions or a clear democratic recovery strategy for assisting cases of new democratic openings.

With greater strategic differentiation should also come greater selectivity among competing demands. The tendency persists among some democracy support actors, especially governments and larger multilaterals, to avoid clear prioritization and instead disperse their efforts across large numbers of countries. The complex variability of the democracy landscape, together with the shrinkage of Western support for democracy aid, means all engaged governments and NGOs need to prioritize more clearly and specialize more consistently. Different organizations, depending on their particular capabilities and interests, will prioritize differently. Some may make the case, for example, that given their organizational profile and experience, it makes more sense to focus on incipient backsliders and potential recovery cases than to push against entrenched competitive and fully authoritarian regimes. But a different democracy supporter could make the reverse case, arguing that it has the pointed tools and strong political will to focus on authoritarian cases, and that even relatively small amounts of aid to key civic actors may make a real difference. The point is not that there is a single right answer to the question of prioritization, but rather that every democracy support actor should grapple with the question and come up with its own persuasive answer. If some greater coordination is achieved within the community, as called for above, there could be a better sense of what types of cases are being covered by what organizations, how to coalesce like-minded support actors, and how to address obvious gaps.

Of course, strategic differentiation is not only about variance among country types. The democracy support community also faces a basic strategic choice of whether to focus at the country level or the transnational level. Democratic challenges that are transnational in nature may be better fought at their heads rather than attempting to cut off the tentacles that reach into many countries. Such transnational challenges include fighting kleptocratic and corrupt transnational networks, undermining organized criminal groups, and fighting authoritarian propaganda and influence operations.

Bridging the West-Rest Divide

Since Trump was first elected president of the United States and illiberal populists began gaining ground in numerous European countries, a growing number of voices in the democracy support community have been arguing that it is time to move beyond the long-standing divide between democracies that provide support and democracies that receive support.[49] They argue that democracy support should be conceived of as a mutual learning endeavor in which all democracies are engaged, relating to each other on a horizontal basis rather than the out-of-date vertical one.

Only limited progress has been made on this. In the United States, a few useful though very small initiatives have sprung up to connect democracy activists in the United States with their counterparts in other democracies to share ideas and practices. A few European funders have supported projects aimed at encouraging the EU to adopt democratic innovations pioneered in the Global South. But such initiatives exist outside mainstream democracy support, and the overall idea remains more talk than action. Governmentally funded democracy support organizations are hesitant about playing a role in "bringing home" lessons from elsewhere in the world, noting that their mandates focus outward rather than inward. In the United States, such groups worry that any association with domestic activists may draw the ire of the punishment-oriented Trump administration. And those privately funded groups that do engage in work comparing the United States to other troubled democracies risk criticism and pressure from U.S. official sources if they highlight critical views on U.S. democracy.

Trump's return to the White House and Europe's growing democratic tremors make clear it is well past time to get serious about bridging the West-rest divide in democracy support. And the demise of most U.S. democracy aid shatters any lingering conception of the United States as primarily a provider in this domain.

Those Western governments willing to be supportive of the two-way format could appoint small teams outside of traditional aid structures to lead this agenda and set up dialogues, forums, and learning labs around the notion of importing democratic ideas. Where governments are not willing to do this—as presumably would be the case with the United States and several European governments at present—democracy-oriented foundations could create funding streams to set up mechanisms separate from governmental channels. Some international organizations with memberships that bridge the traditional donor-recipient divide, like International IDEA, might serve as useful vehicles for these processes. Such ideas could be taken in purposefully challenging directions, like funding Global South actors to draw up strategies for democratic reform in the United States and Europe.

New Narratives and Models

One of the most common current refrains among democracy supporters is that "we need a new narrative for democracy." It arises from their frustration that citizens in many democracies, new and old, are questioning the value of democracy, and that undemocratic actors, especially illiberal populists, seem depressingly effective at offering attractive counter-narratives.

The challenge of new narratives has at least two prongs. The first is the need for more effective narratives about what democracy is and why it is valuable for ordinary citizens. "Valuable" can, of course, have different meanings. Such messaging may point specifically to the socioeconomic benefits democracy provides, or it may offer a broader argument that democracy ensures freedom and dignity. The second prong concerns the need for more effective communication about what international democracy support is and why it is legitimate. Even within well-informed policy circles in Washington and other Western policy capitals, there exists considerable confusion about what democracy support consists of. A tendency to conflate it with military-led regime change is common. The confusion is even deeper in countries on the receiving end of Western democracy support, where understanding of the methods and motivations of democracy support is often murky. A lack of sustained effort over the years on the part of Western democracy supporters to widely explain what they do and how they do it—together with systematic, shrewd attacks on such efforts by resistant autocrats—has left the field in a deep narrative hole.

Useful work on crafting new narratives is not entirely absent. A new initiative, led by the Open Government Partnership, People Powered, and some other groups is taking on the challenge. In the domain of civil society, the Funders Initiative for Civil Society has ably worked in collaboration with civic groups in some countries to develop more effective narratives about what civic activism and civil society are and how they can be valuable to ordinary citizens. But much more needs to be done across other subsectors of the democracy domain relating to political parties, parliaments, judiciaries, media, and other institutions.

In short, the quest for "a new narrative" is in fact the quest for many new narratives, across multiple institutions and relevant to many different national and regional contexts.

Lurking just underneath the surface of the issue of narratives is that of models. Despite constant lip service by Western democracy supporters for years to the idea that they are not in the business of exporting Western democratic models and are open to different conceptions of democracy, the stubborn fact remains that most international democracy support functionally operates from a Western, liberal, democratic model.[50] Without genuine openness to new thinking about democratic models, the search for new narratives may end up being a superficial one.

Debates over models of democracy always risk slipping into gear-spinning exercises involving unhelpful political relativism. Undemocratic political actors love to argue that they are not antidemocratic but simply have a different idea of what democracy is. Yet the present moment of profound disruption of the democracy support field, combined with the deeper flux in the state of global democracy, makes it imperative to give new attention to the need for pluralism of models. Even if wholesale models of Arab democracy, Asian democracy, or African democracy remain elusive—and many reformers in these regions are understandably uneasy about such regionally specific notions—democratic variations can usefully be explored in relation to specific issues. These might include support for different types of civil society bodies, different kinds of political party set-ups, different forms of economic democracy, different kinds of community-based decisionmaking, or innovative forms of direct citizen engagement that do not feature prominently in Western democracies.

New Methods

The massive cuts in U.S. democracy funding, along with aid cuts by various European donors, are putting enormous pressure on former recipients of such support to find new sources of funding. They face the immediate imperative of developing new funding methods—by crowdsourcing money from small dollar donors, for instance, or raising more funds from individuals in countries that have traditionally been recipients of aid. They will need, when possible, to tap high-net-worth individuals among diaspora populations—though doing so will bring with it the well-known issues regarding frequent gaps in political outlook between those living outside their home countries and those who remain engaged on the ground. Those organizations working to obtain greater U.S. private funding will need to do all they can to withstand the pressures imposed by politicized funding so that the United States does not export its own polarization throughout the democracy support sector.

But no matter what efforts are made to secure new sources of funding, the field will have far fewer resources than it has enjoyed in recent years. Operating with reduced funding will require not just greater coordination, stricter prioritization, and more strategic differentiation, but also basic changes in approaches and methods. One overarching change concerns the choice between top-down and bottom-up approaches to democracy aid. In the past fifteen years, democracy aid has been shifting away from large-scale, top-down programs that support the capacitation and reform of major institutions, like judiciaries or legislatures, toward an increasingly dominant focus on bottom-up efforts, with civic groups as primary partners. This shift reflects the shrinking number of countries with positive momentum toward democratic reform—the natural candidates for top-down work—and the multiplication of cases of negative momentum—where civil society approaches are more appropriate. The disrupted funding environment will cement this shift—top-down approaches are usually high-cost compared to bottom-up approaches and become simply unfeasible in a straitened funding environment.

But even within the category of bottom-up approaches, the new funding realities also point to the need for revised methods. This may mean a sharper focus on providing civic groups with opportunities for knowledge-building, domestic and international coalition-building, constituency development, strategic capacity growth, and local resourcing. It may mean greater priority to helping new forms of civic movements that seek tactical support rather than traditional forms of donor aid. It also means that those governments still committed to supporting democracy will need to redouble whatever diplomatic support they already provide to defend civic sectors under pressure.

New models of bottom-up support could be tried. For instance, instead of funding leadership programs and fellowships that help single individuals, aid providers could act on the idea that democracy under stress requires the mobilization of "unlikely allies" who may be willing to act in coalition. Those unlikely allies may include a much broader category of potential democracy champions. For example, bar associations and lawyers have played significant roles in defending democracy in Ghana, Pakistan, and elsewhere. Medical associations may work alongside trade unions as valuable and legitimating actors. Engaging security sectors is absolutely essential, yet current efforts at democracy support to these sectors are almost entirely top-down. Only a handful of bottom-up strategies connect democracy activists with military, police, and other security services that may champion democratic values or act in ways that enable democratic activists to protest without violence. All these new partners may sometime require the kind of emergency assistance that is now offered to environmental defenders, investigative journalists, and more traditional human rights activists. They may also need training in forms of community solidarity that can provide security, but that are rarely a focus of traditional aid provision.

Broad-based fellowship programs could give way to incubators focused on a single country. Such incubators could bring together media personalities and influencers, leaders of social movements that may not be specifically democracy-oriented, possible future politicians, and mass membership groups, enabling local changemakers to meet potential leaders within their countries, get a read on their personalities and integrity, and determine for themselves how they might build a successful movement.

In addition to incubating a networked pro-democracy sector, bottom-up support needs to be able to bolster informal movements in addition to formal NGOs. Both are needed, and yet funders still struggle with how best to support movements, and particularly with how to help build musculature that connects movements, NGOs, political parties, and other key players. USAID's valuable incipient work on this issue was eliminated when the organization was dismantled. Resuscitating it in new forms could be valuable.

A longtime imperative in civil society support—reducing the bias toward more Western-focused civic organizations and giving greater attention to those with a strong local base and focus—is now more acute. Funding highly local organizations with genuine domestic constituencies and their own agendas may mean diverging from more technocratic styles of Western-focused NGOs and feel fraught to external funders. It can also appear to be

more akin to meddling in internal politics in a way that is ethically questionable. After all, authoritarian countries have begun supporting separatist movements, biker gangs, news, and influencers within democracies. How does democratic support differ from these means of influence that many people label as objectionable foreign undermining of democracy? Finding ways to support inclusive and democratic social change while ensuring it remains indigenous and locally driven has thus long been difficult on practical and moral levels—but it is nonetheless even more crucial now than ever before.

Democracy Support Without Democracy?

With democracy support now a tarnished or fading brand among many once-committed democratic governments, and citizen support for democracy softening in many countries, some people within the democracy community are quietly raising the question of whether it is time to partially or substantially detach democracy support from the use of democracy as an organizing narrative.

Such a detachment could occur in one of two ways. First, democracy supporters could shift some of their work "horizontally," centering it on one of the main related concepts that are adjacent to democracy but potentially have greater public buy-in and face less international pushback. Three such concepts are human rights, good governance, and the rule of law. Or democracy supporters could move "vertically" away from the idea of democracy support as a standalone area and instead focus on integrating their work into other major areas of international policy and aid that do not have the same overtly political profile as democracy support but clearly connect to issues of political representation, fairness, and openness. Some such areas include technology, climate, trade and investment, and security, which are all replete with issues germane to preserving and strengthening democracy.

Revising democracy support along either of these lines is unquestionably worth discussing and considering given the travails of the current moment. But there are serious reasons to be hesitant about such a path. Human rights, good governance, and the rule of law are all critical issues that merit support, but something vital could be lost if democracy work were fully folded into them: a focus on the core issue of citizens' right to political choice and how political systems do or do not provide it. With regard to moving vertically toward integrating democracy into other types of policy issues, one problem is that years of work on what was known as "the integration agenda" at USAID—which sought to build democracy concerns into USAID assistance programming for areas such as health and education—consistently struggled to gain traction. In practice, democracy issues almost inevitably stayed on the margins while traditional goals in these domains remained primary.

But it is possible that resistance to such changes in framing and designing democracy support—rooted in the longtime fear among democracy supporters that melting the ice cube of democracy in a larger glass of varied policy concerns will result in no real focus on democracy at all—needs to be challenged. Democracy is losing its place in aid budgets and sliding downward on policy agendas. There is real and pressing need for new debates and questioning on the difficult issue of democracy support without democracy.

Conclusions

It is daunting to contemplate the future of international democracy support when the United States is retreating from its historical leadership role in the field and other major democracies are stepping back from crucial aid commitments. Yet reimagining and reinvention are inescapable imperatives—with necessity comes opportunity. It is not impossible to envision a revamped community of democracy support that displays new, innovative forms of leadership, acts with narrowed but sharpened ambition, employs more differentiated strategies to fit the new global political landscape, engages all democracies—old and new—in genuine mutual learning and solidarity, offers attractive new narratives about democracy and its value, stimulates productive thinking about and experimentation with new democratic models, and forges methods fit for purpose in a time of straitened funding.

This is not the first time the world has been called to confront a daunting challenge in the democracy domain. For most of human history, countries were governed by leaders with absolute power. Democracy is a small blip in that history, yet one that has created the greatest wealth, opportunity, and explosion of human flourishing since humanity began. In 1942, just twelve democracies existed worldwide. The United States counted among them—but within its borders nearly a quarter of its states functioned as authoritarian enclaves, with de facto single-party rule upheld by laws that restricted voting and permitted violence. Other leading democracies governed with human rights at home but with a decidedly different set of values for their colonies. Conflict was not just growing as it is today, but had already engulfed the globe, forcing democracies to make agonizing strategic choices—such as partnering with the Soviet Union to defeat Hitler.

And yet, out of such crooked timber, democracy prevailed and spread. It required immense courage, innovation, and willingness to meet the historic moment. All those who remain committed to the goal of fostering a more democratic world through positive transnational action that works in tandem with pro-democratic domestic struggles are now called to meet a similarly fraught moment. Will we?

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Notes

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