

Democracy Policy Under Biden: Confronting a Changed World

Thomas Carothers and Frances Z. Brown

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The Carnegie Endowment is grateful for support from the Ford Foundation and the Open Society Foundations that helped make the research for and writing of this paper possible. All the views expressed herein are the responsibility of the authors alone.

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Summary

In response to an international context U.S. President Joe Biden has described as an overarching struggle between democracy and autocracy, his administration has set out to support democracy globally as a major foreign policy priority. This effort has entailed grappling with three daunting challenges: a global democratic recession involving dozens of cases of democratic backsliding or collapse; the rising assertiveness of China, Russia, and other autocratic powers; and the troubled status of the United States as a model of well-functioning democracy.

Although the Biden administration has not articulated a formal global democracy strategy, an examination of its efforts to date reveals six main elements of prodemocracy policy, each rooted in a particular theory of change.

- **Countering autocratic challengers:** taking diplomatic, economic, and security-related measures to limit the transnational reach and influence of China and Russia, based on the ideas that those countries are the central axis of expansive authoritarianism and that curbing their aggressive ambitions will bolster a rules-based order in which states and peoples are free to chart their own political courses and democracy can flourish.
- **Engaging multilaterally on democracy:** pursuing high-visibility multilateral and multistakeholder engagement on democracy, in the hope that by standing up together on democracy, the United States and other democracies can bolster global democratic solidarity, reverse the narrative of authoritarianism on the rise, and galvanize practical initiatives to support or defend democracy.

- **Responding to democratic backsliding:** exerting diplomatic and economic pressure to slow, reverse, or head off democratic backsliding in countries where it is occurring, reflecting the view that it is crucial to respond to democratic slippage before new autocratic regimes harden and that doing so will send a signal to other would-be backsliders that they will pay a price for moving down that road.
- **Helping democracy deliver:** mobilizing resources and other support for countries that have experienced promising democratic openings, to help reformist leaders succeed and, in so doing, challenge the pervasive global narrative of democratic failure.
- **Upgrading democracy aid:** increasing the scale of democracy assistance, enhancing programming in certain pivotal areas, and bolstering the position of democracy programming within the aid bureaucracy, reflecting the idea that countering the democratic recession requires a strong, focused aid response.
- **Reforming U.S. democracy:** pursuing efforts to strengthen U.S. democracy, not just from the desire to put U.S. democracy on a better path but from the conviction that the credibility of America's support for democracy abroad depends upon its ability to improve its own democratic functioning.

Taken together, these six policy elements represent a serious response to democracy's troubled global situation and a significant recovery from the damage inflicted to U.S. democracy support by Donald Trump during his presidency. At the same time, each element embodies a complex mix of positive potential and nagging dilemmas and constraints. For example, defending democracy by countering autocratic powers faces the dilemma that the very effort to limit China's and Russia's geostrategic reach pushes the United States to seek closer ties with some backsliding or undemocratic governments. Meanwhile, the Biden administration's big bet on prodemocracy multilateral diplomacy—the Summit for Democracy process—produced some payoffs but also generated downsides, including occupying considerable bureaucratic bandwidth that might have been focused on addressing pivotal democracy challenges around the world.

Steps to counteract specific cases of backsliding have notched some notable successes. Yet they have also sometimes yielded limited impact due to countervailing interests that constrain U.S. actions and due to asymmetries of will between backsliding leaders and U.S. policymakers. Supporting democratic openings holds promise, but success will depend on whether adequate resources can be mobilized and whether better delivery of socioeconomic results on the part of reformist leaders will solidify these nascent openings. In addition, ambitions to reform U.S. democracy have often run aground on the shoals of political polarization and limits to the executive branch's purview, highlighting the perniciousness of the problem more than alleviating it.

The lasting impact of Biden’s democracy policy will only emerge over time, and it will ultimately hinge on the answers to three open questions: Can the administration’s promising thematic democracy initiatives be more fully integrated into U.S. bilateral country policies? Can these initiatives be brought together to ensure they add up to more than the sum of their parts? And can the inherently long-term nature of the bets that the administration is making be underpinned by successful efforts to institutionalize and sustain these policies beyond 2024?

Introduction

When President Joe Biden and his foreign policy team took office in early 2021, they set about to reestablish the United States as a global force for democracy. They defined this goal as an integral part of their efforts to rebuild America’s international standing and encased the push in expansive prodemocracy rhetoric. Biden spoke forcefully in February 2021 of the world being at an “inflection point” in a clash between democracy and autocracy, and he asserted that advancing democracy’s global fortunes was his “galvanizing mission.”¹ Secretary of State Antony Blinken reiterated the same month that the administration’s foreign policy would be “centered on the defense of democracy and the protection of human rights.”²

As the Biden administration got to work in 2021 building out a democracy policy to fulfill these aspirations, it confronted a global democratic landscape marked by three daunting conditions: a worldwide democratic recession involving democratic slippage or failure in many parts of the world; increasing geostrategic challenges from two autocratic powers, China and Russia, seeking ever-wider transnational influence; and a vertiginous fall in America’s international standing as a well-functioning democracy.

This changed landscape demanded new thinking and action from a U.S. democracy policy community long steeped in optimistic assumptions about the world being characterized by expanding democracy, no major geostrategic rivals to the United States, and strong U.S. legitimacy as a democratic model. Biden’s predecessors George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama did not face these three conditions when they attempted in their different ways to support democracy globally. As recently as the Obama years, U.S. foreign policy makers were attempting to engage Russian President Vladimir Putin in a positive “reset” of relations; integrate China into the U.S.-led international liberal order; support what some observers were calling “a fourth wave of democracy” in the Arab world, in Myanmar, and elsewhere; and capitalize on the boost to America’s global democratic standing from having elected the country’s first African American president.³ The three conditions were emergent during Donald Trump’s presidency, but he was uninterested in the global state of democracy and did not grapple with building an effective democracy policy in response to these growing challenges.

With the end of Biden's first term now in sight, the time is ripe to understand how the president and his advisers have tried to construct a democracy policy to meet the demands of this new context. Thus far, commentary about Biden's democracy policy has been dominated by periodic needle-poking relating to policy actions that belie the administration's soaring rhetoric about standing for democracy against autocracy. There is plenty of material for that—whether it is the administration's 2022 reversal of its initial cold shoulder toward Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman or the red carpet the White House rolled out for India's democratically challenged prime minister, Narendra Modi, during his state visit to Washington in 2023. These cases are important and telling, but they do not convey a full picture. Every U.S. administration of recent decades has fallen far short of ambitious prodemocracy rhetoric and cultivated or maintained cozy ties with useful autocrats.⁴ U.S. democracy policy is weakened by this reality but not limited to it: It is a broad policy domain, spanning efforts to support positive democratic change in dozens of countries in multiple regions. It employs myriad policy levers, including economic carrots and sticks, public and private bilateral and multilateral diplomatic engagement, the bully pulpit, and targeted democracy assistance. A wider perspective is thus needed to understand the Biden administration's approach.

Moreover, whoever occupies the White House in 2025 and beyond—be it Biden, Trump, or someone else—will confront this vastly upended global landscape for democracy. The challenges that Biden and his team have been grappling with—and the rethinking of outdated assumptions that the current context has demanded—will continue to be relevant in the years ahead. Understanding how they responded to this global landscape and what can be learned from their efforts is thus essential for future policymakers.

In this paper we take a wide lens, assembling a picture of the Biden administration's approach to democracy support by analyzing six main elements:

- countering autocratic challengers,
- engaging multilaterally on democracy,
- responding to democratic backsliding,
- helping democracy deliver,
- upgrading democracy aid, and
- reforming U.S. democracy.

We examine the administration's case for how each element will advance global democracy in the current international landscape. We then unpack the theory of change for each element, examining what progress it promises and what dilemmas and risks it entails. Our aim is not to grade the results of specific initiatives but instead to convey an in-depth picture of how U.S. democracy policy has evolved in response to a world roiled by democratic trouble.

We close by laying out three large, open questions about whether the Biden administration has met the imperatives of the current context and what its legacy in the democracy domain will be. Can the administration's thematic democracy initiatives be more fully integrated into the United States' bilateral policies toward individual countries? Can the administration's various democracy endeavors add up to more than the sum of their parts? And, the most important for Biden's democracy legacy, can the inherently long-term nature of the bets that the administration is making be underpinned by successful efforts to institutionalize and sustain these policies beyond 2024?

The Main Stage: Countering China and Russia

The major thrust of the Biden team's national security policy—countering China's and Russia's transnational reach and influence—is one and the same with the main pillar of its effort to support democracy globally. The administration's theory of change on this front is that China and Russia represent the central axis of expansive authoritarianism; therefore, limiting both countries' assertive ambitions will bolster a rules-based order in which states are free to chart their own political courses and democracy can flourish. In other words, in a world locked in a “battle between democracy and autocracy” (in the words of Biden), constraining the ambitions of China and Russia is the key determinant of how that battle will turn out and thus the main stage of bolstering democracy's global fortunes.

At the start of the administration, the primary focus of this counter-authoritarian effort was projected to be China. Soon after Biden took office, Blinken described the U.S. relationship with China as “the biggest geopolitical test of the 21st century.”⁵ In response to this challenge, the administration has pursued a multifaceted policy that it summarizes as “invest, align, compete.” In the words of Blinken: “We will invest in the foundations of our strength here at home—our competitiveness, our innovation, our democracy. We will align our efforts with our network of allies and partners, acting with common purpose and in common cause. And harnessing these two key assets, we'll compete with China to defend our interests and build our vision for the future.”⁶ More specifically, this approach includes bolstering alliances that can help contain China's military ambitions in the Indo-Pacific region; limiting China's technological reach and slowing its technological progress in key areas; and offering economic, infrastructure-related, and diplomatic alternatives to China's rapidly growing influence in Africa, Latin America, and other parts of the developing world.

After Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, the other main element of the counter-authoritarian framework—reining in Russia's aggressive actions beyond its borders—surged as an administration priority. The extensive U.S. effort to support Ukraine militarily, economically, and diplomatically, and rally other partners on Ukraine's behalf, represents the core of this policy vis-à-vis Russia. But it is just one part of a broader set of efforts

aimed at limiting Russia’s transnational influence, including augmenting support to other governments that Russia seeks to undercut, enhancing cooperation with NATO allies and other countries that seek to limit Russia’s power, sanctioning Russian individuals and organizations engaged in related activities beyond the country’s borders, or combating Russian disinformation both in the United States and more widely.

Five Additional Elements

Although the Biden team views the geostrategic contest with China and Russia as the main stage of its effort to advance—or at least defend—democracy globally, it has launched or built out at least five other areas of more specifically democracy-focused policies and programs. These other areas have not been advanced as part of an integrated strategy, as the administration decided early on not to spend time attempting to elaborate an overall democracy strategy. They have emerged instead as discrete, albeit somewhat interrelated, initiatives or areas of endeavor pushed by diverse players at the White House, Department of State, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and beyond.

Engaging Multilaterally on Democracy

From the start, the Biden administration has viewed multilateral and multistakeholder (combining governmental and nongovernmental actors) engagement on democracy issues as critical for advancing democracy globally. The theory of change here is that by showing that the United States and other democracies and prodemocratic actors are willing to stand up together for democracy on the international stage, they can bolster global democratic solidarity, reverse the narrative of authoritarianism on the rise, and galvanize practical multilateral initiatives to support or defend democracy.

The administration’s flagship initiative on this front has been the Summit for Democracy process. The administration brought together representatives of more than one hundred countries at two democracy summits. The first was a virtual gathering in December 2021, and the second, cohosted with Costa Rica, the Netherlands, South Korea, and Zambia in March 2023, included both virtual and in-person elements. A third summit, to be hosted by South Korea, is scheduled for March 2024. The aim of the first two summits was to “highlight how democracies deliver for their citizens and are best equipped to address the world’s most pressing challenges.”⁷ Biden administration officials viewed the summits as a forum for encouraging participating governments to commit to reforms of their own democracies, establish solidarity with each other in bolstering democracy globally, and broadcast the message that democracy is the most effective form of government. The administration also used the summits as venues to announce many new aid and policy initiatives (some specific examples of which are enumerated in a later section on democracy aid).

Coming out of the first summit, more than a dozen cohorts—working groups comprising representatives of governments and nongovernmental organizations—were established to focus on themes such as media freedom and technology and democracy, with the goal of identifying and advancing beneficial principles, norms, and practices in these domains. These groups met during the period between the two summits; some have continued meeting since the second one.

Although the Summit for Democracy was the administration's first multilateral diplomatic thrust specifically related to supporting democracy, and what administration officials usually pointed to when asked about democracy support, it was not the only relevant multilateral effort. The administration's leadership in lining up a multistate coalition pushing back against Russia's invasion of Ukraine was effectively prodemocracy multilateral diplomacy, within the broader policy imperative of protecting Ukraine's sovereignty. Another major diplomatic initiative by the administration, the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit in December 2022, was not primarily about democracy but did feature democracy and human rights–related events and initiatives. In addition, the administration has sought to reengage in various existing multilateral forums where U.S. participation fell off during the Trump years. The administration reengaged with the Open Government Partnership initiative, for example, reversing the Trump administration's lackluster engagement with that Obama-era initiative. The administration also returned the United States to membership in the UN Human Rights Council, reversing the Trump administration's withdrawal from it.

Responding to Democratic Backsliding

Democratic backsliding is an increasingly prominent global phenomenon—whether in the form of gradual negative drift or punctuated setbacks, like coups and compromised elections. Thus, another key plank of the Biden administration's democracy policy has consisted of efforts to slow, reverse, or head off backsliding in some places where it is occurring. Depending on the specific national context and the bilateral diplomatic relationship, such pushback has typically involved a combination of quiet diplomatic cajoling and public diplomatic criticism; economic sticks, like aid reductions or targeted sanctions; and the mobilization of wider support from other concerned democracies for additional prodemocratic pressure. The underlying theory of change is twofold: first, it is crucial to respond to democratic slippage as it is occurring before new autocratic regimes harden; and second, doing so forthrightly in at least some countries will send a signal to other would-be backsliders that they will pay a diplomatic and economic price for moving down that road.

The administration has pushed back against some coups that have occurred on its watch, including military coups and so-called presidential self-coups. Myanmar is the most prominent such case. Since the military coup there in early 2021, the administration has imposed sanctions against the country's military leaders and some military-related entities, suspended economic aid to the government, publicly criticized the military leaders, and

sought to mobilize wide international condemnation of the strangulation of the country's fledgling democracy. The administration has also sought to push back against at least some of the coups that have proliferated in the Sahel in recent years. After coups in Burkina Faso, Gabon, Mali, and Niger, for example, the administration suspended or terminated some U.S. assistance, in line with legislation. In some of those countries, it also exerted some diplomatic pressure on coup leaders to agree on a plan for a transition back to elected civilian rule. Following the 2021 self-coup by Tunisian President Kais Saied, administration officials engaged in extensive quiet diplomacy to try to persuade the Tunisian leader to limit his autocratic drive.

The administration has also engaged preemptively in some countries to try to head off coups, unconstitutional extensions of presidential terms, or other forms of backsliding where they threaten to occur. One key case is Brazil, where the administration mounted a full-court press to ensure the results of the critical 2022 presidential election between incumbent Jair Bolsonaro and challenger Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva were respected. In the run-up to the election, multiple senior administration officials quietly warned Brazil's military leaders that there would be "significant, negative ramifications for the bilateral military-to-military relationship"—a crucial one for Brazil—if the uniformed brass did not respect the outcome of the election.⁸ Complementing this discreet effort, the administration publicly underscored its confidence in "Brazil's capable and time-tested electoral system and democratic institutions" and provided practical assistance in helping Brazil surmount supply chain challenges to equip its new voting machines.⁹

Another notable case is that of Guatemala. After entrenched antidemocratic forces in the country began taking steps to block the inauguration of Bernardo Arévalo, the reformist politician who won the August 2023 presidential election, the Biden administration involved itself in multiple ways—including engagement by U.S. diplomats and military officials with Guatemalan counterparts and the imposition of targeted sanctions—to help ensure that Arévalo was able to take office as scheduled in January 2024.¹⁰ In Senegal, the administration undertook quiet direct diplomacy with President Macky Sall to encourage him not to try to extend the constitutionally mandated two-term limit and seek a third term, as Sall signaled that he might do.¹¹ In July 2023, Sall announced he would not try for a third term.¹² Then, in early February 2024, amid steadily closing space for political opposition, Sall announced an indefinite postponement of the presidential election that had been scheduled for later in the month.

Helping Democracy Deliver

In addition to focusing on democracy's travails, the administration has also hinged part of its democracy policy on an important, oft overlooked truth: despite the larger democratic recession, democracy has shown progress or promise in multiple countries—and those cases merit enhanced U.S. engagement. Integral to these initiatives is the theory of change that democracy has been failing in many countries because of its inability to provide a tangibly better life for ordinary people; therefore, helping new or long-standing reformist leaders

show that democracy delivers will help get democracy off the back foot globally.¹²

In September 2022, the administration launched the Democracy Delivers Initiative, an effort to support “democratic bright spots”—countries experiencing a promising democratic opening—in their attempts to achieve reforms and deliver tangible outcomes for their citizens.¹³ A key feature of the initiative includes surging cross-sectoral “support, resources, and attention” to these countries, underpinned by the notion that supporting democratic reform cannot be the responsibility of government alone. Beyond programming, USAID has leveraged the convening power of the U.S. government to bring together businesses, foundations, civil society organizations, and bilateral and multilateral donors to help reformers generate democratic, economic, and social dividends for their people. The initiative is currently active in Armenia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Malawi, Maldives, Moldova, Nepal, Tanzania, and Zambia.

On the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in September 2023, Blinken, USAID Administrator Samantha Power, and Development Finance Corporation (DFC) CEO Scott Nathan convened leaders of all nine of these countries together with representatives of selected philanthropies and businesses to discuss ways to increase support for these countries’ priorities.¹⁴ The private sector and philanthropic actors pledged over \$110 million in investments, complementing a combined \$145 million of support from USAID and the DFC. For example, Malawi received several new pledges of support from both private actors and the U.S. government for programs relating to maternal health, sustainable energy, and community justice.

A complementary initiative, the Partnerships for Democratic Development (PDD), offers multiyear programmatic support to countries that demonstrate sustained democratic progress to help those partner countries address development challenges in a democratic manner. The PDD is intended as an investment in the long-term success of democratic transitions. As of 2023, the administration had announced Armenia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Malawi, Nepal, North Macedonia, Paraguay, Timor-Leste, and Zambia as PDD countries.

Upgrading Democracy Aid

In addition to the Democracy Delivers Initiative and the PDD, the administration has worked to upgrade democracy assistance overall, by increasing its scale, enhancing programming in certain pivotal areas, and bolstering the institutional position of democracy programming within the aid bureaucracy. The overarching theory of change is that the democratic recession requires a larger democracy aid response and more focus on certain issues that are pivotal in current global struggles over democracy.

With respect to scale, at the first Summit for Democracy, the administration announced the Presidential Initiative for Democratic Renewal, a package of democracy-related aid measures, and requested \$540 million (\$270 million annually) in support of the initiative,

subject to availability of funds and congressional input.¹⁵ Overall, the administration has almost doubled the annual request to Congress for funding for democracy, rights, and governance support, from \$1.69 billion for FY 2021 (the last annual request by the Trump administration) to \$3.15 billion for FY 2024.¹⁶ The administration has complemented this increased push for higher aid levels with an upgrade to the place of democracy assistance within the foreign assistance bureaucracy. More than thirty years after USAID first declared that democracy would be one of the core pillars of its work, it has created a dedicated bureau on democracy, human rights, and governance within the agency.

In terms of increased focus on pivotal issues, USAID has identified seven priority topics related to democracy and governance: anti-corruption, digital rights, media freedom, electoral integrity, women's and girls' rights, social movements, and "people-centered justice."¹⁷ USAID has been working in some of these areas, like anti-corruption and media freedom, but now seeks to do more. Other areas are relatively new directions for USAID, like support for social movements and people-centered justice.

Anti-corruption and digital rights are two high priorities within this overall set. For each, the administration combines new or reoriented aid initiatives with policy engagement, seeking to bolster positive efforts by other democratic governments, international nongovernmental organizations, and domestic civic activists globally. On anti-corruption, the administration put forward the first-ever U.S. strategy for combating corruption,¹⁸ as well as a "dekleptification guide" and an array of programmatic initiatives.¹⁹ Initiatives include establishing the Financial Transparency and Integrity Accelerator to address the underlying conditions and weaknesses that encourage corruption, launching the Empowering Anti-Corruption Change Agents Program to support and protect those at risk due to their anti-corruption work abroad, and issuing revised recommendations for combating bribery of public officials.²⁰ Capping off U.S. leadership in the anti-corruption arena, in December 2023 the United States hosted the tenth Conference of the States Parties to the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC COSP), the only legally binding global anti-corruption instrument, and Biden released a presidential proclamation restricting entry into the United States of people who enable corruption.²¹

On technology, the administration has made a push to, in its words, "harness current and emerging technology in a manner that supports democratic values and institutions."²² This push has included aid measures to strengthen global informational integrity and resilience especially in the Global South and the creation of USAID's Advancing Digital Democracy initiative, which works with partner countries to foster an inclusive ecosystem that advances democratic values and human rights.²³ It also comprises policy actions such as the Donor Principles for Human Rights in the Digital Age, which sets out an international framework to ensure donor-supported programs do not facilitate the weaponization of data-driven technology and information.²⁴ The Biden administration has also launched a resource center for the responsible use of artificial intelligence, developed the National Strategy to Advance Privacy-Preserving Data Sharing and Analytics, and released guiding principles on governments' use of surveillance technologies.²⁵ In addition, in 2023, Biden issued an

executive order that prohibits federal agencies from using commercial spyware that poses a significant risk to national security. Included in the definition of improper use is the use of commercial spyware to facilitate repression and human rights abuses.²⁶

Reforming U.S. Democracy

With Trump's refusal to accept the legitimacy of the 2020 presidential election and the Trump-fueled mob attack on Congress on January 6, 2021, reverberating in U.S. politics as Biden took office later that month, the administration came to power vowing to strengthen U.S. democracy. This determination reflected not just the desire to put U.S. democracy on a better path but also the conviction that America's ability to support democracy abroad depends upon its ability to improve its own democracy. Blinken stated in March 2021 that America's efforts to renew democracy at home would be "the foundation for our legitimacy in defending democracy around the world."²⁷ The Biden administration is the first U.S. administration of recent decades that clearly links the imperative of bolstering American democracy with U.S. global democracy policy, one part of a broader emphasis on interlinkages between U.S. foreign policy and U.S. domestic realities.

To this end, Biden has tried to avoid using polarizing language and partisan public skirmishing of the sort that Trump reveled in as president, in the hope of reducing the destructive partisan fever in U.S. politics. He has spoken often of the need to defend U.S. democracy from domestic antidemocratic forces or tendencies. In the intensely polarized environment of today's politics, however, such efforts are seen in different ways on either side of the spectrum. In September 2022, for example, Biden called for "Democrats, independents, [and] mainstream Republicans" to be "stronger, more determined, and more committed to saving American democracy than MAGA Republicans are to—to destroying American democracy."²⁸ Supporters of Biden were inclined to view this as an effort to put limits on toxic polarization; opponents were inclined to view it as fanning the flames of division.²⁹

The administration and its supporters in Congress secured passage of the Electoral Count Reform and Presidential Transition Improvement Act of 2022 that clarifies procedures for the tallying of electoral votes and the relative federal and state roles in selecting the president and vice president. In response to rising calls on both sides of the political aisle for possible changes to the basic structure of the U.S. Supreme Court, Biden convened a Presidential Commission on the Supreme Court of the United States. It released a report in December 2021 describing various possible reforms to the Supreme Court—without endorsing significant structural changes.³⁰ The administration has also aimed to respond to some newer challenges to U.S. democracy, such as those posed by artificial intelligence (AI). The 2022 Blueprint for an AI Bill of Rights and Biden's 2023 Executive Order on Safe, Secure, and Trustworthy Development and Use of Artificial Intelligence both emphasize democratic principles by stressing the protection of civil liberties, civil rights, and equal opportunities in the development of AI.

The administration, together with congressional Democrats, has made various attempts to enshrine sweeping voting rights protections into law. For example, Biden supported the For the People Act of 2021 (and the narrower Freedom to Vote Act of 2022), which, among other things, would expand voting rights and ban partisan gerrymandering. Likewise, Biden urged Congress to pass the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act of 2021, which would restore and strengthen parts of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that were stripped away by the Supreme Court's 2013 decision in *Shelby County v. Holder*. All of these reforms, however, were blocked in the Senate when the bills fell short of the sixty votes needed to invoke cloture. As a result, Biden supported changing Senate rules to exempt voting rights legislation from the filibuster, which also failed without support from Senators Joe Manchin (D-WV) and Kyrsten Sinema (I-AZ). Supporters and opponents of the president disagreed about whether this effort on filibuster reform was a prodemocratic or antidemocratic move.

Assessing the Administration's Bets

Taken together, these six areas of Biden's policy represent a serious response to democracy's troubled global situation. They also constitute a significant, ongoing recovery from the damage inflicted by Trump during his presidency to U.S. democracy support abroad. At the same time, the different theories of change underlying these areas merit close scrutiny, as each embodies a mix of positive potential and nagging dilemmas and constraints.

Trade-Offs Between Geopolitical Interests and Democracy Support

The administration's major emphasis on countering China and Russia has a powerful logic: as the Biden team argues, ensuring a future in which the rules-based liberal order triumphs, rather than one in which aggressive authoritarian states operate unimpeded from their own playbook, will be critical to the future of democracy globally. Yet centering a democracy policy on this geopolitical thrust entails two significant dilemmas and risks.

First, the very effort to try to limit China's and Russia's geostrategic reach pushes the United States to seek closer ties with some backsliding or undemocratic governments, either to enlist them as partners in the struggle or to try to pull them away from a looming lean toward the autocrats' camp. Such pursuits usually mean giving the governments in question a free pass on their democratic shortcomings. Trading off democracy for security interests is, of course, a long-standing pattern in U.S. foreign policy—but it has gained new impetus from rising U.S. competition with China and Russia.³¹ This emphasis has perhaps been most evident in Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy of assembling partners to join the United States in trying to limit China's growing military and diplomatic weight in the region. Biden's efforts to cultivate closer security ties with India, highlighted by the extremely warm reception the

administration extended to Modi during his state visit to Washington in June 2023, is a prominent case in point. Senior administration officials report they discuss U.S. concerns about India's troubling domestic political trajectory in meetings with Indian counterparts, but these are quiet notes in a larger chorus of enthusiastic friendship. Vietnam is another example. When Biden traveled to the country in September 2023 and the administration announced a new comprehensive strategic partnership between the two countries, references to Vietnam's continuing repressive politics were absent from the related White House statement lauding the "unprecedented and momentous elevation of ties between the two countries."³²

In Africa, the U.S. struggle to limit China's and Russia's influence in different parts of the continent, from the Sahel and West Africa to East and Southern Africa, involves similar trade-offs. Although the administration has tried to push back against some of the military coups that have occurred in the Sahel in the past several years, its response has been muted in some cases, such as Chad and Guinea, at least in part because of the administration's wariness of driving useful security partners toward Russia. The administration made a minor, purposeful, though thus far unsuccessful diplomatic outreach to the Central African Republic, offering the country's undemocratic government security assistance if it would agree to abandon its relationship with the Wagner Group, a Russian-funded private military organization.³³ Washington maintains relatively cooperative ties with the repressive government of Equatorial Guinea in part to try to discourage that country from following through on a rumored plan to allow China to build a naval base in the country.

In Central Asia, the administration has stepped up engagement with some of the region's autocrats—marked by Biden's meeting with five Central Asian leaders on the margins of the UN General Assembly in September 2023 and a trip to the region by Blinken earlier in the year. These efforts reflect the administration's perception that the unhappiness on the part of some of these leaders and their citizens with Russia's actions in Ukraine creates an opportunity for Washington to encourage these governments to lean at least somewhat away from their close ties with Russia.³⁴

The fact that the United States often de-emphasizes democracy and rights in various countries in service of its larger agenda of contesting China and Russia tends to be accepted in Washington as an unfortunate but necessary price to pay. Yet in the eyes of many people outside the United States, both in countries allied with the United States and more widely, these trade-offs undercut the notion that the current U.S. geopolitical agenda is really about advancing freedom in the world. Instead, they see it as another example of America trying to wrap its own geostrategic interests in appealing universal principles, akin to the Cold War days when America talked of leading the free world but counted many harsh dictatorships among its key partners.

A second risk of anchoring democracy policy in countering China and Russia is that, as we have argued elsewhere, much of the recent global democratic backsliding has little to do with China and Russia.³⁵ In most of the major cases of democratic slippage of the past ten to fifteen years, including in Bangladesh, El Salvador, Ethiopia, India, Mexico, Myanmar,

Nicaragua, the Philippines, Thailand, Tunisia, and Türkiye, democratic backsliding has stemmed primarily from domestic political, economic, and social factors and was not significantly driven by growing Chinese or Russian influence in the country. In some of these cases, the illiberal political actors who have driven the backsliding have ended up befriending China and/or Russia as they tighten their grip, finding diplomatic and economic support from new autocratic friends to be useful, especially in cases where Western support diminishes. But the overall antidemocratic political trajectory is mostly internally, not externally, driven. A democracy strategy centered on China and Russia thus does not get at the core drivers underlying most of the cases that make up the global democratic recession.

If democracy-related resources—in terms both of high-level policy attention and financial resources—become primarily tied to a China/Russia response framework, a misalignment can arise in how Washington is attempting to respond to the larger landscape of democratic troubles. To be sure, the Biden administration’s democracy policy does include significant elements not focused on China and Russia, ones that attempt to address causes of the larger array of democratic problems in the world. Yet the main geostrategic stage of the administration’s policies inevitably absorbs most of the high-level attention and weight in the policymaking space.

The Challenge of Achieving Results From Multilateralism

As outlined earlier, a priority element of the administration’s democracy policy has been its multilateral engagement, above all convening the two Summits for Democracy. Indeed, for the first two years of the administration’s term, in response to critics charging the Biden team with inadequate prioritization of democracy and rights, administration officials invariably pointed to their work on the summits.

The big bet on a high-level summit series as a signature democracy initiative has offered some payoffs but also generated downsides. On the positive side, the summits had value along three main lines: First, and most concretely, they were action-forcing events within the U.S. bureaucracy, galvanizing the government to move forward with various aid and policy initiatives relating to democracy. The executive order on spyware was one example—the administration pushed hard internally to get it done in time to announce it at the second summit. Second, they were useful signaling events that generated some media attention, conveying that the administration was giving attention to democracy internationally and that over one hundred governments were willing to publicly affirm their commitments to democracy. Third, some of the thematic cohorts that were established after the first summit did contribute to useful new initiatives on varied democracy issues, such as on technology, media freedom, and anti-corruption. For example, the information integrity cohort contributed to the development of enhanced activities by USAID and the State Department to strengthen information integrity and resilience globally.³⁶

Yet given the enormous amount of time and effort the summits demanded of key democracy practitioners and advocates within the executive branch and beyond, there is a fair question of the opportunity costs. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan's statement in late 2023 that the summits "created an institutional basis for deepening democracy and advancing governance, anticorruption, and human rights" seems overoptimistic.³⁷ Tangible outcomes of the summits were modest: the gatherings of world leaders were relatively superficial events, primarily consisting of prerecorded video presentations and some relatively short, formal affirmations of principles. The initial idea of the summits as a process in which governments would make political reform commitments and then fulfill those commitments over time has borne relatively little fruit; by the second summit, there was scant mention of the commitments that had been required in the first.

In addition, as the summits consumed the democracy community's time and attention, they produced the risk that the democracy-focused policymakers within the administration were operating in parallel to, and not integrated into, bilateral U.S. policymaking toward countries where democracy hung in the balance. Overall, the summit process shows a definite risk of heading in the direction of a second Community of Democracies—the initiative launched by the Clinton administration in 2000 that has produced countless gatherings of representatives of democratic governments but few tangible results.

Countervailing Interests and Asymmetric Commitments on Backsliding

Given the seriousness and prevalence of democratic backsliding globally, the administration's willingness to respond strongly to at least some cases of it is important. The administration's prodemocratic engagement in Brazil in the lead-up to the 2022 elections, for example, helped head off a potentially momentous blow to democracy in Latin America. Yet the Biden team has confronted three nettlesome issues in its quest to limit or reverse backsliding.

The first is the fact that countervailing U.S. interests vis-à-vis many backsliding contexts militate against a strong U.S. democracy response. As discussed in the earlier section on countering China and Russia, some of these crosscurrents arise from Washington's competition with Beijing and Moscow to gain the friendship and loyalty of many governments. It is difficult, for example, for the United States to push the Indian government hard on its troubling policies regarding minority rights and fundamental freedoms when Washington is in full courtship mode with New Delhi in its quest to line up major partners against Beijing. Responding in a principled fashion to coups has proven difficult in the Sahel, where Russia is fishing for new friends and capitalizes on anti-Western sentiment. And, after Poland stepped up as a key ally in the U.S.-led response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, whatever inclination the Biden team had to distance itself from Poland's illiberal government of the time dissipated.

The geopolitical angle is not the only complicating factor. Given the wide range of U.S. security interests around the world, countervailing interests particular to a specific country or subregional context often exist. The Biden administration's relative silence on troubling democracy and human rights issues in Mexico is related to the administration's need for help from the Mexican government on migration. The administration has engaged seriously to try to slow or constrain the autocratic march of Tunisia's strongman president, yet such actions are quietly balanced against the need to preserve the long-standing relationship that the United States has with Tunisia's military.

The second serious challenge to the anti-backsliding agenda is the inescapable asymmetry that affects such efforts: for the backsliding leader, the political project of autocratization is often of existential importance; backing down from it implies political failure and a possible ouster. By contrast, for Washington, limiting or reversing the backsliding is a nice-to-have policy goal, but U.S. officials are not likely to go to the mat for it. Indeed, often it is just one of several, coexisting U.S. priorities for a specific country. This asymmetry, combined with the strong perception in many foreign capitals of diminishing U.S. influence globally and weakened U.S. credibility in delivering prodemocratic messages, causes many leaders—even of relatively small, weak countries—to shrug off entreaties or pressure from Washington. The fact that at least somewhat robust U.S. prodemocratic engagement with Tunisia's leader has not turned him away from his autocratizing project is testament to this fact. So too is the reality that the president of a country as small and traditionally dependent on the United States as El Salvador can defy the Biden administration's stated wishes regarding democratic principles and pay no real price for doing so. Even when the United States exerts a high degree of economic pressure—such as on Myanmar and Venezuela—elites find ways to insulate themselves, either by hiding assets or forging alliances with U.S. rivals.

A third challenge on backsliding is the simple fact of limited U.S. policy bandwidth. Crafting an effective response to democratic backsliding requires steady, nuanced policy engagement that is well-coordinated across the different, relevant parts of the U.S. government. It also requires continued follow-up as backsliding powers adapt and push back. Ideally, such engagement needs to begin early, when backsliding is just starting, and then continue and evolve as the government in question implements its illiberal playbook.³⁸ When the country is of significant size and overall profile, such concerted engagement is sometimes possible. Brazil is arguably such a case. Yet when it is a small country unlikely to make U.S. headlines, sustained, high-level, prodemocracy policy engagement is hard to muster. This was particularly the case during the first two years of the Biden administration, when many key democracy policy officials had their hands full with extensive preparations for the two global democracy summits. Moreover, as the administration has lacked a confirmed assistant secretary for democracy, human rights, and labor due to the Senate's refusal to confirm a nominee for the position, the Biden team has lacked a primary senior democracy champion in the policy arena.

Questions About Democracy Delivering

The administration's bet that helping reform-oriented governments show their citizens that democracy can deliver is a useful complement to other parts of its democracy policy. Focusing on emergent bright spots is not itself novel; for decades, the United States has hurried aid to countries that experience democratic breakthroughs.³⁹ But by elevating this policy approach as a flagship initiative, the administration raises the chances of bringing to bear greater diplomatic muscle and aid resources. In addition, given the gloomy outlook about democracy in analytic and policy circles, it is a useful corrective to highlight the fact that democratic openings are still occurring and that Washington can boost them. With its focus on the need for democracy to deliver, the effort seeks to address the deeper causes of democratic failure rather than just to treat the symptoms, something the United States and other prodemocratic international actors have been slow to do over the course of the global democratic recession. The Democracy Delivers Initiative is still too new to permit any judgment about its impact, but several potential challenges to its success, or at least issues that will need to be addressed as it develops, merit mention.

One obvious question is whether the administration can mobilize significant and sustained help for countries that are largely of low strategic importance to the United States (such as the Dominican Republic, Malawi, Maldives, and Zambia). Washington is so beset with pressing demands for assistance and congressional earmarks often leave so little room for maneuver that doing a lot for these countries will be a challenge. Administration officials note that mobilizing new aid resources is less the goal than mobilizing other actors—such as U.S. businesses and private philanthropic organizations—to step up for these countries, and they flag that the initiative has already galvanized a sizable array of partners.⁴⁰ They also argue that precisely because most of the targeted countries are small, even relatively modest amounts of additional support will be noticed and make a difference. Nevertheless, the administration's own ability to deliver on its promise to help others deliver will be a test.

A second issue that speaks to the need for further deepening and broadening of this policy initiative is the stubbornly difficult question of the causes of democratic failure. A close look at a diverse array of relevant cases shows the insufficiency of the simple assumption that backsliding is mainly driven by governments falling short on economic performance. In some countries, such as El Salvador and the Philippines, it was citizen anger about physical insecurity rather than economic well-being that fueled illiberal populist leaders. In other cases, such as Poland and Türkiye, notable economic success preceded the emergence of illiberal autocratic leaders; instead, it was identity and culturally based divisions and ambitions on the part of different social groups that underpinned support for the leaders. Additionally, assuming that citizens' embrace of illiberal leaders is a key factor in backsliding ignores cases like Guatemala, where the incipient backsliding was about the reassertion of power by entrenched elites determined to strangle looming democratic accountability, not about popular support waning for well-intentioned democrats. In these and other cases, looking to ensure the success of a democratic opening or to head off democratic slippage by simply helping "democracy deliver" is too narrow a playbook.

A third question is about the initiative's longevity. The initiative was established and has been advanced by a strong, high-profile head of USAID, Samantha Power. Its implementation therefore hinges on the unusually high level of prominence and policy heft that she brings to the table. While the new USAID democracy bureau is engaged in the initiative, the overall effort has been largely spearheaded by the team around the administrator. Whether this initiative will survive her eventual departure from USAID—and the arrival of a successor who potentially has other interests and likely a lower profile—is thus another question mark.

The Value and Limits of Aid

Upgrading and retooling democracy aid to better meet the current international moment is unquestionably a strong forward step on the administration's part. The democracy aid community, both in the United States and other donor countries, has been slow to move past ways of thinking and acting that were formed decades ago, when democracy was expanding worldwide and the core goal was bolstering ongoing transitions. Now that the global context is marked by widespread democratic slippage, the effort to modernize aid programs, including by giving extra attention to issues of pressing current relevance, is long overdue. The administration's heightened emphasis on anti-corruption work, for example, is a valuable recognition of the corrosive role corruption has been playing in many democracies. Similarly, the greater focus on digital repression and other technologically driven harm to democracy is a welcome sign of catching up to the fast-changing factors that are distorting and damaging democracy globally.

At the same time, the limits of democracy aid remain. It is worth bearing in mind that since the global democratic recession emerged in the second half of the 2000s, the United States has spent over \$30 billion on democracy aid (and European donors have together spent a similar amount), yet the recession has advanced year by year.⁴¹ Compared with the main domestic drivers of a country's political trajectory, like the configuration of political forces and the relative strength of different political institutions, democracy aid coming into a country from an external actor is usually a relatively weak factor in shaping outcomes. In addition, democracy aid only reaches certain countries; little goes to some of the major current or recent cases of backsliding, such as Brazil, India, Mexico, and Türkiye.

Furthermore, democracy aid can only be strongly effective if is complemented by matching engagement on diplomacy and security. For example, a technical aid program to increase electoral integrity in a country where the government threatens to compromise the electoral process needs complementary diplomatic and economic pressure on the government. Sometimes U.S. democracy aid receives such supportive policy engagement, but sometimes it does not. U.S. democracy aid goes to various autocratic governments, such as Jordan and Morocco, with which the United States maintains friendly ties and therefore asserts little diplomatic pressure around democracy issues.⁴² It is no surprise, then, that two of the seemingly most promising arenas of the administration's democracy aid push—anti-corruption and technology—also feature robust policy initiatives. In these areas, the

administration has ably combined policy and aid initiatives to bolster or establish new partnerships and programs that will make tangible, positive contributions. A key question now is whether the administration can join up other focal areas of democracy aid, like media freedom and support for people-centered justice, with complementary policy engagement.

Blockages on U.S. Democratic Reform

It is of cardinal importance to prioritize the reform of U.S. democracy as an integral part of strengthening U.S. credibility and effectiveness as a prodemocratic actor internationally. The Biden administration gets credit for having put that domestic-international nexus squarely on the table. But reforming U.S. democracy has proven ferociously difficult for a host of reasons. At the structural level, significant reforms like ensuring voter access and reducing the overrepresentation of certain parts of the U.S. electorate have encountered intractable political opposition, despite the administration's earnest attempts to lead on these issues. Many of these issues are simply not within the purview of the White House to change and instead require congressional action that has not been forthcoming. In addition, some antidemocratic moves are occurring at the level of state executives or state legislatures, also beyond the administration's direct reach.

Separately, at the level of core sociopolitical dynamics—above all the quest to reduce extreme partisanship and polarization as well as antidemocratic attitudes and inclinations among politicians and citizens—progress has been painfully difficult and slight. The unfolding 2024 presidential campaign is characterized by intensely polarizing rhetoric from Trump and some other Republican candidates and a flaring up of concern among many observers about whether a second term for Trump would result in serious potential attacks on American democracy. Despite what the Biden administration believes have been well-intentioned efforts to limit toxic polarization and strengthen some of the guardrails on U.S. democracy, the United States heads into the 2024 election season with many observers feeling similar to how they felt coming out of the 2020 election: profoundly queasy about the basic democratic health of the country. In short, emphasizing the need for the United States to get its own democratic house in order to be able to stand up for democracy beyond its borders is a correct bet to make but, so far, a hard bet to win.

Conclusion: Three Open Questions

Under Biden's leadership, U.S. global engagement on democracy is back to a similar level of commitment and effort as it enjoyed under the administrations of Obama, Bush, and Clinton. The Biden team has taken seriously the goal of supporting democracy, wrapped it in elevated rhetoric, and pursued it in multifaceted ways. Yet democracy support is part of an overarching national security framework that involves countervailing security and economic

interests in various countries and regions, resulting in democracy concerns regularly being pushed to the back burner. The result is an uneven policy marked by often contrasting, even clashing elements that sometimes prioritize and sometimes demote democracy.

The current, daunting international context of assertive autocratic powers and widespread democratic regression reinforces this long-standing dualism. On one hand, it gives the democracy agenda a heightened sense of urgency. Compared with, for example, the Obama years, it is not just a rhetorical flourish to say that this is a time when democracy's global destiny hangs in the balance. Yet simultaneously, the present setting also works against the United States pursuing a democracy policy that is as all-out as some democracy support enthusiasts would wish. The intensification of geopolitical tensions with China and Russia has multiplied the cases where the United States has mixed interests, impelling it to go easy on numerous democratically dubious governments. The trend of rising multipolarity means that Washington has to work hard to accommodate many middle powers that do not trust Washington as a prodemocratic actor; are skeptical about or actively oppose many U.S. policies carried out under the democracy banner; and, in some cases, have serious democratic shortcomings of their own.

Meanwhile, the simple fact that democracy is not the exciting growth stock that it once was causes many in the U.S. foreign policy community to doubt whether the United States should continue to invest much in it. And the country's continuing domestic democratic woes, including a major candidate for the upcoming presidential election who denies the reality of his loss in the last election, continue to diminish the appetite of many Americans, and non-Americans, for a vigorous U.S. engagement on democracy outside its borders. Biden's democracy policy embodies this whole picture—the urgency that triggers real engagement together with all of the contrary realities that weaken the effort.

Ultimately, the lasting impact of Biden's democracy policy will hinge on the answers that emerge over time to three open questions. The first is whether the administration's promising thematic democracy initiatives can be more fully integrated into U.S. bilateral policies toward individual countries. As we have written elsewhere, unless democracy-related imperatives are injected “deep in the trenches” of country-specific policy processes and regional bureaus' considerations, the administration's banner democracy efforts run the risk of floating free of the day-to-day choices of forging U.S. policy in critical cases.⁴³ If the administration is able to rechannel the vast energy and attention that went to the Summits for Democracy toward exerting diplomatic heft and creativity in places where democracy is often overridden as a consideration, the effects could be significant. Fine-grained U.S. prodemocracy engagement could be impactful in places Washington leans on heavily for security and economic partnerships. Democracy will not trump security and economic concerns that may pull in a different direction, but Washington can demonstrate the will, creativity, and necessary bureaucratic capacity to pursue multiple policy prerogatives toward these countries at once.

The second open question is whether the administration's various democracy initiatives will add up to more, or less, than the sum of their parts. This paper has painted a picture of the administration's democracy policy comprising one major thrust and five smaller ones. In so doing, it possibly presents a more concrete, cohesive depiction than is perceived by those in government; nowhere has the Biden team expressly laid out a strategic vision naming these elements and stating how they are meant to braid together. This raises the risk that the administration will miss the opportunity to leverage some key synergies: for example, the insight that "democracy has to deliver" is a key way of understanding both the backsliding in many countries, such as those in Africa experiencing coups, and the rising populism that allows pro-Russian and Chinese sentiments to take hold. A wholesale upgrading of the place of democracy in U.S. foreign policy—elevating it to the top of the agenda and elaborating an integrated strategy of democracy support that wraps together all elements—is unlikely. But a more cohesive articulation of how the initiatives can reinforce each other is possible.

The third open question—and the most important of all for Biden's democracy legacy—has to do with time. The theories of change underpinning many of these initiatives are long-term bets. The focus on competition with China and Russia is a major case in point. The administration sees itself engaged in a battle for the future, to uphold the rules-based order that it views as vital for international peace and stability and for ensuring all countries and peoples can pursue democracy. But to achieve this end, the United States must pursue very long lines of policy engagement, with a focus and consistency over time that has not characterized U.S. foreign policy in the past decade. The various sponsors of democracy initiatives within the administration should not, and do not, claim that these initiatives will yield determinative results in a couple years; it will take much longer to assess whether they will generate their desired outcomes. But the Biden team may only have one more year in office—thus, much depends upon whether it can multilateralize its oftentimes nascent initiatives or institutionalize them into robust planks within the bureaucracy.

Against the backdrop of these open questions, there looms the stark possibility of a closing window. Supporting democracy is a long-term endeavor, which in the current challenging international context requires the nuanced balancing of interests in key relationships over time, the gradual integration of new strands of diplomacy and aid into country-specific policies, and other sustained policy work. Most U.S. administrations' legacies take more than three years to cohere, so there is nothing unusual that the current read on Biden's democracy policy is "too soon to say." But even if Biden wins a second term, meeting these demands will be difficult given the continual press of urgent events that pull the administration in different directions. Moreover, as the United States hurtles toward the November 2024 elections, there is a sizable chance that the next president will be Trump, who many observers fear will upend democratic norms and commitments both at home and abroad even more thoroughly than he did during his first term as president. This existential issue for U.S. democracy is the one that may end up overshadowing all other aspects of the Biden team's democracy legacy.

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Acknowledgments

The authors thank Brendan Hartnett and Francesca Nyakora for their research contributions to the paper and Scott Busby, Steven Feldstein, and Patrick Quirk for valuable comments on a draft. We are also grateful to the Carnegie Communications team, including Haley Clasen, Lindsay Maizland, and Amanda Branom, for help with editing, layout, and production of the paper. The Ford Foundation and the Open Society Foundations provided financial support that helped make the research for and writing of the paper possible. All views expressed herein are the responsibility of the authors alone.

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