



United States

Lincoln Mitchell

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States has been deeply involved in democracy promotion for decades. In addition to the broad network of democracy organizations that it supports, it has integrated the promotion of democracy into all aspects of its foreign policy. The United States seeks to support human rights and democracy not only through programs and policies, but also through rhetoric and example. However, it simultaneously bolsters friendly nondemocratic regimes and has frequently refrained from criticism when other interests are involved.

The United States provides impressive technical support to political parties, election commissions, and civil society. It has also been committed to strengthening civil liberties abroad, even in challenging environments. The country has been part of a global movement working to expand the rights of LGBT people. Its record has been much more mixed on responses to coups and other disruptions of democratic processes, as well as to gross human rights violations.

Introduction

More than any other country, the United States seeks to promote democracy on a global scale. It has taken action to this end in places ranging from authoritarian Belarus and transitional Myanmar and Georgia, to those such as Mexico that are more or less democratic but face a variety of threats and challenges. This global reach is a result of the U.S. government's integration of democracy promotion into its larger foreign policy, and the success or failure of its efforts has worldwide significance.

The United States has a long, if sometimes flawed and inconsistent, record of supporting democracy. While the U.S. government has played a crucial role in fostering and defending democratic rule in Germany, Japan, and postcommunist Europe, as well as other states in Asia and Latin America, it has also bolstered strategically important authoritarian regimes and tailored its definition of democracy to suit its own, separate foreign policy priorities. Moreover, the U.S. government has made decisions about where to work based on what is politically possible, as opposed to steadfastly selecting the places where the greatest need exists. This inconsistency in part reflects the unique position of the United States as the world's most powerful country, with a complex set of interests and imperatives. Some believe that the country has a duty to address a broad range of global concerns that at times conflict with democracy support.

Democracy promotion is nonetheless deeply embedded in the American system. Although the extensive network of U.S.-based democracy

About this project

This project analyzes support by 11 democratic powers for democracy and human rights during the period June 2012–May 2014.

About the author

Lincoln Mitchell is an associate of the Arnold A. Saltzman Institute for War and Peace Studies, Columbia University.

organizations—donor agencies, nongovernmental groups, think tanks, specialized academic centers, and congressionally chartered institutions—has been critically described as the “democracy bureaucracy,”¹ its existence also indicates the sophistication of the enterprise. Well-established entities like the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute, and the National Endowment for Democracy are central to U.S. and indeed global efforts to support democratic governance. The United States is also active in multilateral organizations such as the Community of Democracies, holding a seat on the governing council and the executive committee.

Meanwhile, the United States still faces its own internal challenges. Although it is a consolidated democracy, universal suffrage in practice dates only to the mid-1960s. The country is currently confronting a number of chronic problems such as weak voter participation, the outsized and potentially corrupting role of moneyed interests in politics, and the effective disenfranchisement of some voters through the manipulation of electoral laws. Human and civil rights issues including racial disparities in the criminal justice system, mass data collection by intelligence agencies, and the use of torture on terrorism suspects all damage the country’s ability to present itself as a model for democracy.

Foreign Policy Objectives

According to the 2010 U.S. National Security Strategy, one of the goals of U.S. foreign policy is “to promote democracy and human rights abroad.” It continues, “The United States supports the expansion of democracy and human rights abroad because governments that respect these values are more just, peaceful, and legitimate. We also do so because their success abroad fosters an environment that supports America’s national interests.”² Notably, this is a subsection of the “Values” portion of the document, indicating that at least with regards to rhetorical emphasis and strategic planning, democracy promotion is not a top-tier priority of the U.S. government.

USAID, the world’s largest bilateral donor organization working on democracy issues, released a new strategy in mid-2013 that stated, “Support for DRG [Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance] is vital to the pursuit of freedom and national security, and is essential to achieve the Agency’s and the United States Government’s broader social and

economic development goals.” This reflects the fact that operationally, U.S. commitment to the promotion of democracy remains constant and strong. This document also spells out the U.S. government’s definition of democracy: “A civilian political system in which the legislative and chief executive offices are filled through regular, competitive elections with universal suffrage. Democracy is characterized by civil liberties, including the rights to speech, association, and universal suffrage, as well as the rule of law and respect for pluralism and minority rights.”³

Stating the centrality of democracy promotion to U.S. foreign policy goals is nothing new for American leaders. U.S. diplomatic approaches to democracy promotion during the Obama administration have been, like in every U.S. administration, inconsistent. Though George W. Bush was more emphatic than Barack Obama regarding democracy promotion, in practice that has not translated into a qualitative difference in U.S. support for these programs.

The current administration has made the promotion of democracy and human rights a less visible part of diplomacy than it has been at some points in the past. This became clear, for example, during discussions with China in the early days of the Obama administration, when the subject of human rights was only lightly broached.⁴ Some observers viewed the “reset” with Russia as an additional example of this pattern. Similarly, U.S. diplomacy with Egypt since the fall of President Hosni Mubarak in 2011 has been driven more by the need to maintain relations with whoever is in power, rather than a substantial concern for promoting democracy in that country.

Development Assistance and Trade

Democracy is an important component of U.S. development and trade policy, but it is always part of a broader set of goals. The United States tends to focus on democracy support in countries where the United States is unhappy with a regime that is also vulnerable, or those that are heavily dependent on assistance and are thus good targets for democracy projects.

As a result, the role and priority of democracy promotion in U.S. assistance and trade policies vary substantially. In authoritarian countries with which the United States has extensive trade relations, such as Saudi Arabia and China, human rights and democracy issues are given at best peripheral treatment; in contrast, the United States raises issues

of human rights and democracy more frequently in Iran and Cuba, countries with which it has almost no trade relations. This reflects the complexity of the current U.S. role as the global hegemon, as well as the strategic interests of Saudi oil and strong economic ties with an ascendant China. Similarly, although nearly every beneficiary of U.S. development assistance receives some funding and support for democracy and human rights, failure to address these issues rarely jeopardizes assistance.

In fiscal year (FY) 2013, 5.4 percent of U.S. foreign assistance was spent on democracy and governance. For FY 2014, democracy and governance represented 5.8 percent of obligated funds. However, these data may be misleading, as U.S. government reporting often defines democracy and governance programs very broadly, while undercounting the democracy promotion work funded from other parts of the budget.⁵ The proportion also varies substantially from country to country. In FY 2013, 86 percent of the \$5.7 million in foreign assistance for Venezuela was slated for democracy and governance, compared with Myanmar, where the number was a much more modest 8 percent of \$54 million, and China, with only slightly more than 1 percent of \$15.1 million in assistance. In Egypt, economic development needs restricted democracy and governance to just below 3 percent of the \$614 million in U.S. assistance.⁶

Elections

The United States has an extensive set of programs and policies to promote and support free, fair, and democratic elections around the world. The primary areas of focus are supporting and cultivating domestic election observers, participating in multinational election-observation missions, and capacity building to support the development of functioning and democratic political parties.

From a programmatic perspective, the United States is very committed to free and fair elections. In FY 2013, the United States spent \$170 million globally on “Political Competition and Consensus-Building,” which is largely election-related work. This was about 14 percent of the total democracy and governance budget for the fiscal year, and is probably a slight undercount as it does not include money sent to multilateral organizations for election monitoring and related activities.⁷ The United States provides impressive technical support to political

parties, election commissions, and relevant civil society organizations, in addition to a high degree of engagement in and support for international election-monitoring efforts.

Meanwhile, U.S. support for the election process is subject to major political considerations. Election monitors provide technical information and data that are open to interpretation, which often leads to final reports and statements that are influenced by other interests.

The international election observation and support community, in which the United States plays a very big role, is increasingly in the position of identifying election fraud and other related problems; however, they are unable to address them in any meaningful way. This raises the question of whether the goal of election observation is simply to document fraud or in fact to make a difference in the election. For example, in 2013, Ilham Aliyev was reelected as Azerbaijan’s president with 84.5 percent of the vote. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) said about the election, “Significant problems were observed throughout all stages of election day processes.”⁸ However, the United States has never sought to significantly question the legitimacy of Aliyev’s presidency or his election. Regardless of whether this is a realistic expectation, it demonstrates the conundrum facing U.S. election support efforts.

In general, U.S. efforts remain deeply tied to broader aims of U.S. foreign policy that occasionally, but not always, overlap with those of democracy. For example, U.S. support for the 2014 election of a generally pro-Western leader in Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko, dovetailed nicely with the interests of democracy and fair elections. However, in Georgia in 2012, the United States was reluctant to confront the depth of election abuses and intimidation that were perpetrated in an (unsuccessful) effort to ensure victory for the party of then-president, and staunch U.S. ally, Mikheil Saakashvili. In Venezuela, the United States was particularly attentive to fraud in the 2013 election of President Nicolás Maduro, an opponent of U.S. influence. The United States sought to overturn the election, or at least conduct a recount based on somewhat controversial assertions of election irregularities there.

Disruptions of Democratic Processes

The United States has a deeply mixed record in responding to disruptions of democratic and constitutional processes. The issues are particularly complex because most ousted leaders are not clear liberal democrats overthrown by blatantly authoritarian governments, but rather flawed politicians who have severely compromised whatever democratic credentials they once had.

In recent years, the two cases best exemplifying this complexity and the various U.S. responses are Egypt and Ukraine. In July 2013, the Egyptian military ousted President Mohamed Morsi, who had been elected in a flawed but competitive election in June 2012. The military consolidated power, cracked down on opposition, killed and imprisoned hundreds, and declared Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization. While his removal from office can be called a coup, it did not dislodge a democrat in any meaningful sense of that word. During Morsi's first months in office, he had concentrated power in the presidency, reduced the power of other governing institutions, and restricted opposition. The United States, with many competing strategic priorities in Egypt, condemned the abuses of the post-Morsi government after some pressure from Congress, but stopped short of using the word "coup." Although it froze much of the military aid it usually sends to Egypt, it did so only reluctantly, after several months and some debate in Washington.

Events in Ukraine from November 2013 through the summer of 2014 were similarly complicated. A largely, but not entirely, peaceful protest movement ultimately led to the removal of President Viktor Yanukovich, who had been elected democratically in 2010. Like Morsi, Yanukovich had not governed as a democrat, violently limiting rights of assembly and notably the media, in addition to engaging in extreme corruption. Moreover, Yanukovich was, at the time of his resignation, trying to stop his country's movement toward the West and especially the European Union, while the demonstrators who ousted him were geopolitically oriented toward the West. Washington greeted Yanukovich's removal as an unequivocal victory for democracy, despite its own strained relationship to constitutional processes, while authoritarian Russia derided the events as a coup. The truth probably lies somewhere in between, but this nuance was never publicly entertained by the U.S. government.

Following the conclusion of Yanukovich's presidency and the subsequent Russian invasion of Crimea and incursions into other parts of Ukraine, the United States sought to help the interim government function better, to bolster the now-freer Ukrainian civil society, and to support the May 2014 presidential election. These actions support Ukrainian democracy. However, they also stem from a one-sided view of the complex events that ended Yanukovich's presidency. Yanukovich was corrupt and ultimately responded violently to protests, but he was also democratically elected and enjoyed support in much the country. This raises the question of how the United States would respond to a semiviolent ouster of a corrupt but fairly elected leader who happened to be, unlike Yanukovich, an American ally.

Thus, the U.S. commitment to democracy is not clear in either the Ukraine or Egypt case, or in similar cases around the world.

Gross Human Rights Violations

The U.S. response to gross human rights violations during the period covered by this report has been mixed. This is partially due to the vexing nature of many human rights abuses—which rarely lead to straightforward or unchallenging policy options. The United States also demonstrates a reluctance to influence human rights policies in powerful countries or those on whom it relies for valuable economic or security cooperation.

The most glaring example of this is the extensive and multilayered relations between the United States and China, one of the world's biggest human rights violators. Despite China's terrible human rights record, the United States has failed to speak out against abuses unless they directly involved U.S. interests. It has fallen back on narrowly defined economic and political interests rather than taking a bold stance.

A further example is Syria. In late 2013, extensive debate in the United States centered on how best to respond to the deteriorating human rights environment related to the civil war in that country. Much of this debate focused on the use of chemical weapons against civilians, which is clearly an important human rights issue. However, that focus ignored the thousands who had died at the hands of the murderous Assad regime through the use of conventional weapons. The Obama administration explored

a military response to President Bashar al-Assad's use of chemical weapons, but without the support of Congress the administration decided not to pursue it. Instead, Russia brokered a deal leading to the destruction of many of Syria's chemical weapons. Meanwhile, killings, a refugee crisis, and widespread human rights violations continue in Syria, indicating that the "responsibility to protect" is not a driving force of American foreign policy.

Finally, because the United States seeks to promote human rights and democracy through rhetoric and example as well as programs and policies, its failure to address domestic human rights problems, such as the American prison system, can undermine foreign policy.

Civil Liberties

As opposed to other areas, the United States generally has taken a clear position in favor of civil liberties, particularly with regards to freedom of the media. Strong programmatic and political support for freedoms of association and assembly, and civil society more broadly, has been central to the U.S. democracy promotion strategy for many years. This includes contributing financially to watchdog and advocacy-based civil society organizations across the globe, and drawing frequent attention to violations of these basic freedoms. As in other areas, this support has often been filtered through broader political considerations and the demands of specific bilateral relationships.

In FY 2013, 23.2 percent of U.S. democracy and governance funding was spent on civil society support. This is more money than was spent on elections, which is generally thought to be the linchpin of democracy assistance. This funding goes to a range of programs providing support to countless civil society organizations, and generally takes the form of capacity building, technical support, and related work. Although this measure is a good heuristic, it is not a precise figure; some civil society funding is allotted to service organizations, and some support for freedoms of speech and assembly come from other budget lines.

The United States promotes and encourages civil liberties from many angles. It facilitates hundreds of visits to the United States each year by journalists and other civil society representatives, supports training programs for journalists in challenging environments on blogs and other media, and helps

journalists protect their physical and digital security in countries where they are under threat.⁹ The United States not only draws attention to violations of these freedoms under unfriendly regimes such as Russia or Venezuela—where the United States has reliably spoken out against the absence of media freedom¹⁰—but also under pro-U.S. regimes. For example, regarding Saakashvili's Georgia in 2012, a State Department report said that "direct or indirect government influence over the most watched countrywide media outlets remained a problem. . . . While print media frequently criticized senior government officials during the year, some individuals affiliated with newspapers reported facing pressure and intimidation by the preelection government for doing so."¹¹

Nevertheless, the ability of the United States to strengthen civil liberties and freedoms has varied. Despite the country's occasionally strong positions regarding Russia, China, and others, media restrictions continue and freedom of association is limited. Although the United States has been unambiguous in seeking to protect freedom of assembly in Maduro's Venezuela, it has been inconsistent in responding to and speaking out against ongoing restrictions on journalists and civil society activists in China, Russia, the Gulf states, and elsewhere. This further demonstrates the significant challenge of turning intent, commitment, and resources into outcomes.

Marginalized Communities

The United States has frequently sought to ensure the protection of marginalized communities in other countries. For example, the U.S. democracy and governance portfolio has incorporated into its core programming efforts to empower women and reduce discrimination against them. Moreover, in recent years the United States has been part of a global movement to strengthen respect for the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals around the world, with significant impact. Over the last decade or so, issues of LGBT equality have been integrated into the U.S. democracy and governance portfolio in a way that sends a clear message of support. The United States cannot take full credit given the involvement of European governments and others, but the accomplishment is nonetheless important. Allies and other countries that receive U.S. assistance now know that the United States will not look away from cases of discrimination against LGBT citizens.

Efforts to protect ethnic and religious minorities have met with mixed results, and in some cases little action has been taken. For example, the United States has been less vocal in defending the rights of Uighurs and Tibetans in China than it has been with regards to minorities in less powerful countries. In certain cases, fighting discrimination has been folded into broader democracy and governance programs. In Pakistan, for example, programs to create opportunity and protection for Shia and non-Muslim minority groups have been an important target of USAID funding.

In Myanmar, although the United States has put substantial resources into the democratic transition and the election that is scheduled to occur in 2015, it has done almost nothing in response to the widespread human rights violations being inflicted upon the Rohingya, a Muslim minority group. In Rakhine state, where most of the Rohingya live, these people have been killed in attacks by members of the Buddhist majority; thousands have been placed in internment camps. Other ongoing human rights violations for which the United States has had little response include the treatment of Muslims in the Central African Republic, and human rights violations during the recent conflict in Mali.

In Latin America, the United States has strongly emphasized the protection of the rights of indigenous peoples. In Ecuador, Guatemala, Colombia, and numerous other countries, the United States has supported efforts to empower these groups, primarily through supporting local civil society organizations.

ENDNOTES

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1301 Connecticut Ave. NW., Floor 6
Washington D.C. 20036

120 Wall Street, 26th floor
New York, NY 10005

www.freedomhouse.org

202.296.5101
info@freedomhouse.org