How Democracy Can Win

The Right Way to Counter Autocracy

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When U.S. President Joe Biden took office in January 2021, the United States had just witnessed four of the most turbulent years in recent memory, culminating in the failed insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on January 6. Without a doubt, American democracy had been shown to be far more fragile than it was when Biden left the vice presidency in 2017.

The picture abroad wasn't much brighter. Populist parties with xenophobic and antidemocratic tendencies were gaining momentum in both established and nascent democracies. The world's autocracies seemed newly emboldened. Russia was clamping down on dissent at home and encouraging authoritarianism abroad through election interference, disinformation campaigns, and the actions of its paramilitary Wagner Group. Meanwhile, China's government had become

even more repressive at home and more assertive abroad, stripping Hong Kong of its autonomy and leveraging its vast bilateral financial investments to secure support for its policies in international institutions. In February 2022, just three weeks before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin announced a new strategic partnership that they claimed would have "no limits."

But early 2022 may prove to be a high-water mark for authoritarianism. Putin's ambitions to dominate Ukraine failed miserably, thanks to the unwavering resolve and courage of the Ukrainian people. Putin made mistake after strategic mistake while the free people of Ukraine successfully mobilized, innovated, and adapted.

The root causes of Moscow's disastrous showing are numerous, but several bear the hallmarks of authoritarianism. Graft has rotted the Russian military from within, yielding reports of soldiers selling fuel and weapons on the black market. Russian commanders have taken massive risks with the lives of their soldiers: conscripts arrive at the front having been lied to and manipulated rather than properly trained. To avoid upsetting their superiors, military leaders have supplied overly rosy assessments of their ability to conquer Ukraine, leading one pro-Russian militia commander to call self-deception "the herpes of the Russian army."

Russia's ghastly conduct in Ukraine has left Moscow more isolated than at any time since the end of the Cold War. Most European countries are in a race to decouple their economies from Russia, and Finland and Sweden are on the brink of joining an expanded and united NATO. Public opinion of Russia and Putin has plummeted in countries around the world, reaching record lows, according to the Pew Research Center. In Russia's immediate neighborhood, Moscow's traditional security and economic partners are staying neutral, refusing to host joint military exercises, seeking to reduce their economic dependence on Russia, and

upholding the sanctions regimes. Russians themselves are voting with their feet: officially, hundreds of thousands of citizens have fled, but the true number is likely well over one million and includes tens of thousands of valued high-tech workers.

The past few years have also demonstrated the shortcomings of Beijing's model. In 2020 and 2021, senior Chinese officials claimed that the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the superiority of their system. They regularly took potshots at the United States for its high COVID-19 death toll. Unquestionably, the United States and other democracies made mistakes in handling COVID-19. But unlike Chinese citizens, dissatisfied voters in these countries were able to elect new leaders and consequently change their governments' approach to the pandemic. By contrast, Beijing withheld vital data from the World Health Organization, refused to work with other nations in developing a vaccine, and stuck with its harsh "zero COVID" policy until late 2022. It continues to be opaque about the COVID-19 situation in China, limiting the international community's understanding of potential variants.

The world's autocrats are finally on the defensive.

Elsewhere, public support for populist parties, leaders, and antipluralist attitudes has dropped significantly since 2020, in part because of how populist-led governments mishandled the pandemic. Between mid-2020 and the end of 2022, populist leaders saw an average decline of 10 percentage points in their approval ratings in 27 countries analyzed by researchers at Cambridge University. In the same time frame, prominent leaders with autocratic tendencies lost power at the ballot box. And American democracy has proved resilient; the U.S. Congress passed meaningful electoral reforms and held powerful public investigations into the events leading up to January 6.

Autocrats are now on the back foot. Under Biden's leadership, the United States and countries around the world have joined forces to protect and strengthen democracy at home and abroad and to work together on challenges such as climate change and corruption. After a year of faltering authoritarianism and stubborn democratic resilience, the United

States and other democracies have a chance to regain their momentum—but only if we learn from the past and adapt our strategies. For the last three decades, advocates of democracy have focused too narrowly on defending rights and freedoms, neglecting the pain and dangers of economic hardship and inequality. We have also failed to contend with the risks associated with new digital technologies, including surveillance technologies, that autocratic governments have learned to exploit to their advantage. It is time to coalesce around a new agenda for aiding the cause of global freedom, one that addresses the economic grievances that populists have so effectively exploited, that defangs so-called digital authoritarianism, and that reorients traditional democracy assistance to grapple with modern challenges.

NOT A FRAGILE FLOWER

In his address to the British Parliament in 1982, U.S. President Ronald Reagan observed that "democracy is not a fragile flower; still, it needs cultivating." Since then, the cultivation of democracy abroad has largely meant the provision of what we call democracy assistance: funding to support independent media, the rule of law, human rights, good governance, civil society, pluralistic political parties, and free and fair elections.

This assistance from the United States, which grew from just over $106 million in 1990 to over $520 million in 1999, supported democratic actors in countries locked behind the Iron Curtain as they became proud, thriving members of a free Europe. After brave protesters broke the grip of Soviet rule, our assistance helped newly independent countries establish everything from public broadcasters to independent judiciaries. Similar initiatives aided reformers throughout Africa, Asia, and Latin America as they solidified their democracies.

Although it is difficult to measure just how much these programs have advanced democratic progress around the world, multiple studies have identified ways in which democracy assistance from the United States and other donors has supported positive outcomes. The U.S. Agency for International Development, the institution I lead and the largest provider of democracy assistance in the world, has had "clear and consistent

impacts" on civil society, judicial and electoral processes, media independence, and overall democratization, according to one study of the agency's democracy promotion programs between 1990 and 2003. A later study commissioned by USAID found that every $10 million of democracy assistance it provided between 1992 and 2000 contributed to a seven-point jump on the 100-point global electoral democracy index maintained by the nonprofit Varieties of Democracy.

Delivering aid in Bahir Dar, Ethiopia, December 2021

J. Countess / Getty Images

But the same study showed that these positive effects began to falter in the years after the 9/11 attacks on the United States. Between 2001 and 2014, the same amount of investment only saw an increase of a third of a point—still two and a half times more than the average annual change among countries in the electoral democracy index over that period, but a much more diminished impact than in previous years.

Of course, a host of interrelated factors contribute to democracy's struggles: polarization, significant inequality and widespread economic dissatisfaction, the explosion of disinformation in the public sphere, political gridlock, the rise of China as a strategic competitor of the United States, and the spread of digital authoritarianism aimed at repressing

free expression and expanding government power. Many of these challenges can only be solved domestically. But those of us invested in the global renewal of democracy must help societies address economic concerns that antidemocratic forces have exploited; take the fight for democracy into the digital realm, just as autocracies have; and adapt our toolkit to meet not just long-standing challenges to democracy but also new ones.

BLINDED BY THE RIGHTS

At the core of democratic theory and practice is respect for the dignity of the individual. But among the biggest errors many democracies have made since the Cold War is to view individual dignity primarily through the prism of political freedom without being sufficiently attentive to the indignity of corruption, inequality, and a lack of economic opportunity.

This was not a universal blind spot: a number of political figures, advocates, and individuals working at the grassroots level to advance democratic progress presciently argued that economic inequality could fuel the rise of populist leaders and autocratic governments that pledged to improve living standards even as they eroded freedoms. But too often, the activists, lawyers, and other members of civil society who worked to strengthen democratic institutions and protect civil liberties looked to labor movements, economists, and policymakers to address economic dislocation, wealth inequality, and declining wages rather than building coalitions to tackle these intersecting problems.

Democracy suffered as a result. Over the past two decades, as economic inequality rose, polls showed that people in rich and poor countries alike began to lose faith in democracy and worry that young people would end up worse off than they were, giving populists and ethno-nationalists an opening to exploit grievances and gain a political foothold on every continent.

We must look at all economic programming as a form of democracy assistance.

Moving forward, we must look at all economic programming that respects democratic norms as a form of democracy assistance. When we

help democratic leaders provide vaccines to their people, bring down inflation or high food prices, send children to school, or reopen markets after a natural disaster, we are demonstrating—in a way that a free press or vibrant civil society cannot always do—that democracy delivers. And we are making it less likely that autocratic forces will take advantage of people's economic hardship.

Nowhere is that task more important today than in societies that have managed to elect democratic reformers or throw off autocratic or antidemocratic rule through peaceful mass protests or successful political movements. These democratic bright spots are incredibly fragile. Unless reformers solidify their democratic and economic gains quickly, populations understandably grow impatient, especially if they feel that the risks they took to upend the old order have not yielded tangible dividends in their own lives. Such discontent allows opponents of democratic rule—often aided by external autocratic regimes—to wrest back control, reversing reforms and snuffing out dreams of rights-regarding self-government.

The task before reformist leaders is enormous. Often they inherit budgets laden with debt, economies hollowed out by corruption, civil services built on patronage, or a combination of all three. When Zambian President Hakainde Hichilema took office in 2021 after winning a landslide victory over an incumbent whose regime had arrested him more than a dozen times, he discovered that his predecessors had accumulated over $30 billion in unserviceable debt, nearly one and a half times the country's GDP, with very little new infrastructure or return on borrowing to show for it. In Moldova, where the anticorruption advocate Maia Sandu was elected president in 2020, a single corruption scandal had previously siphoned off a whopping 12 percent of the country's GDP.

Election Day in Chisinau, Moldova, November 2020

Vladislav Culiomza / Reuters

To help rising democracies overcome such hurdles, USAID has stepped up with additional support. We have identified and increased our investment in a number of democratic bright spots, including the Dominican Republic, Malawi, the Maldives, Moldova, Nepal, Tanzania, and Zambia. That list is by no means comprehensive, and admittedly some of these bright spots shine more intensely than others in their commitment to democratic reform. But all are working to fight corruption, create more space for civil society, and respect the rule of law. Biden has also created a special fund at USAID so we can move quickly to help bright spots deliver on their key economic priorities as they pursue reforms and consolidate democratic gains.

But we don't just want to boost our assistance to these countries; we want to help them prosper beyond the impact of our programming. The U.S. government's flagship food security initiative, Feed the Future, which works with agribusiness, retailers, and university research labs to help countries improve their agricultural productivity and exports, recently expanded to include Malawi and Zambia. USAID has also partnered with Vodafone to expand the reach of a mobile app called m-mama to every region in Tanzania. The app is akin to an Uber for

expectant mothers, helping pregnant women who lack ambulance services reach health facilities and contributing to a significant decrease in maternal mortality. In Moldova, which is pushing ahead with anticorruption reforms despite ramped-up economic pressure from Russia, USAID has worked to increase the country's trade integration with Europe. And at the UN General Assembly in September, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and I gathered the heads of state of many of these rising democracies, together with corporate executives and private philanthropies, to encourage new partnerships.

That event illustrated a crucial point: strengthening democratic reformers cannot be the task of government alone. All who believe in the importance of transparent and accountable governance must mobilize whenever there is a democratic opening, helping reformers deliver tangible benefits to their people. For governments and multilateral institutions, that could mean enacting favorable policy reforms, lowering tariffs or quotas, or simply making high-level official visits to visibly embrace reformers. For foundations, philanthropies, and civil society, that could mean offering new grants and partnerships. And for businesses and financial institutions, it could mean expanding existing investments or exploring new ones. Even individuals can do their part to support democracy by considering a democratic bright spot for their next vacation.

PRINCIPLED AID

Everywhere they provide assistance, democratic countries must be guided by and seek to promote democratic principles—including human rights, norms that counter corruption, and environmental and social safeguards. In contrast to the approach of autocratic governments, we showcase the potential benefits of our democratic system when we provide assistance in a fair, transparent, inclusive and participatory manner—strengthening local institutions, employing local workers, respecting the environment, and providing benefits equitably in a society.

Over the past four decades, Beijing has transformed from one of the largest recipients of foreign assistance to the largest bilateral provider of

development finance, mostly in the form of loans. Through its enormous infrastructure investments, Beijing has helped many developing countries build seaports, railways, airports, and telecommunications infrastructure. But the second-order effects of China's financing can undermine the long-term development objectives of partner countries and the health of their institutions. Much of the development financing China offers, even to highly indebted poor countries, is provided at nonconcessional market rates through opaque agreements hidden from the public. According to the World Bank, 40 percent of the debt owed by the world's poorest countries is held by China. And attempts by highly indebted borrowers such as Zambia to restructure their debts to China have been slow and fractured, with Chinese lenders rarely agreeing to reductions in interest rates or the principal.

Because they are subject to little public oversight, Beijing's loans are often diverted for personal or political gain. A 2019 study in the *Journal of Development Economics* found that Chinese lending to African countries increased closer to elections and that funds disproportionately wound up in the hometowns of political leaders. These loans skirt local labor and environmental safeguards and help the Chinese government secure access to natural resources and strategic assets, boosting state-owned or state-directed enterprises.

Democratic donor countries and private businesses must increase their investments in projects that elevate economic and social inclusion and strengthen democratic norms—decisions that ultimately yield not only more equitable results but also stronger development performance. Together with the rest of the G-7, the United States plans to mobilize $600 billion in private and public investment by 2027 to finance global infrastructure. Crucially, we will do so in a way that advances the needs of partner countries and respects international standards—a model for all such investments moving forward. This new Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment will finance clean energy projects and climate-resilient infrastructure; fund the responsible mining of metals and critical minerals, directing more of the profits to local and indigenous groups; expand access to clean water and sanitation services

that particularly benefit women and the disadvantaged; and expand secure and open 5G and 6G digital networks so that countries don't have to rely on Chinese-built networks that may be susceptible to surveillance.

DIGITAL DANGERS

Like inequality and economic privation, potentially dangerous digital technologies have not received nearly enough attention from most democracies. The role that such tools have played in the rise of autocratic governments and ethnonationalist movements can hardly be overstated. Authoritarian regimes use surveillance systems and facial recognition software to track and monitor critics, journalists, and other members of civil society with the goal of repressing opponents and stifling protests. They also export this technology abroad; China has provided surveillance technology to at least 80 countries through its Digital Silk Road initiative.

Part of the problem is a lack of global norms and legal or regulatory frameworks that embed democratic values into tech design and development. Even in democratic countries, programmers often have to define their own professional ethics on the fly, developing boundaries for powerful technologies while also trying to meet ambitious quarterly goals that leave them little time to reflect on the human costs of their products.

Biden came into office recognizing the vital role technology will play in shaping our future. That is why his administration partnered with 60 other governments to release the Declaration for the Future of the Internet, which outlines a shared positive vision for digital technologies as well as a blueprint for an AI bill of rights so that artificial intelligence is used in line with democratic principles and civil liberties. In January 2023, the United States also assumed the chair of the Freedom Online Coalition, a group of 35 governments committed to reinvigorating international efforts to advance Internet freedom and counter the misuse of digital technology.

We must break down the wall that separates democratic advocacy from economic development.

To build resilience to digital authoritarianism, we are kicking off a major new digital democracy initiative that will help partner governments and civil society assess the threats that misuse of technologies pose to citizens. We launched a new initiative with Australia, Denmark, Norway, and other partners to better align our export controls with our human rights policies. We blacklisted flagrant offenders, such as Positive Technologies and NSO Group, both of which sold hacking tools to authoritarian governments. And in the coming months, the White House will finalize an executive order barring the U.S. government from using commercial spyware that poses a security threat or a significant risk of improper use by a foreign government or person.

But perhaps the biggest threat to democracy from the digital realm is disinformation and other forms of information manipulation. Although hate speech and propaganda are not new, the rise of mobile phones and social media platforms has enabled disinformation to spread at unprecedented speed and scale, even in remote and relatively disconnected regions of the world. According to the Oxford Internet Institute, 81 governments have used social media in malign campaigns to spread disinformation, in some cases in concert with the regimes in Moscow and Beijing. Both countries have spent vast sums manipulating the information environment to fit their narratives by disseminating false stories, flooding search engines to drown out unfavorable results, and attacking and doxxing their critics.

The most important step the United States can take to counter foreign influence campaigns and disinformation is to help our partners promote media and digital literacy, communicate credibly with their publics, and engage in “pre-bunking”—that is, seeking to inoculate their societies against disinformation before it can spread. In Indonesia, for example, USAID has worked with local partners to develop sophisticated online courses and games that help new social media users identify disinformation and reduce the likelihood that they will share misleading posts and articles.

The United States has also helped Ukraine in its fight against the Kremlin’s propaganda and disinformation. For decades, USAID has

worked to enhance the media environment in the country, encouraging reforms that allow greater access to public information and supporting the emergence of strong local media organizations, including the public broadcaster Suspilne. After Russia's initial invasion of Ukraine in 2014, our work expanded to help the country's local journalists produce Russian-language programming that could reach into Kremlin-occupied territories, such as Dialogues With Donbas, a YouTube channel that featured honest conversations with Ukrainians about life behind Russian lines. We also helped support the production of the online comedy show *Newspalm,* which regularly racks up tens of thousands of views as it skewers Putin's lies. And even before Moscow's full-scale invasion began in February 2022, we worked with the government of Ukraine to stand up the Center for Strategic Communications, which uses memes, well-produced digital videos, and social media and Telegram posts to poke holes in Kremlin propaganda.

A RECIPE FOR RENEWAL

Despite these successes, the global fight against digital authoritarianism remains fragmented and underfunded. The United States and other democracies must work more closely with the private sector and civil society groups to identify challenges, build partnerships, and increase investments in digital freedom around the world. At the same time, we must react to new challenges that journalists, election monitors, and anticorruption advocates face, updating democracy assistance programming to respond to ever-evolving threats.

To that end, the United States has launched several new initiatives—many of them inspired by activists, civil society, and pro-democracy nongovernmental organizations—under the banner of the Presidential Initiative for Democratic Renewal, which Biden unveiled at his 2021 Summit for Democracy. For instance, we have heard from independent journalists around the world that one of the major impediments to their work, in addition to death threats and intimidation, is lawsuits brought against them by those whose corruption they seek to expose. These frivolous lawsuits can cost journalists and their outlets millions of dollars, putting some out of business and creating a chilling effect for

others. In addition to helping strengthen the physical security of news organizations, therefore, USAID has established a new insurance fund, Reporters Shield, that will help investigative journalists and civil society actors defend themselves against bogus charges. In recognition of the economic challenges all traditional media outlets face even in the United States, we have also organized a new effort to help media organizations that are struggling financially develop business plans, lower costs, find audiences, and tap into new sources of revenue so that they do not go bankrupt when independent journalism is needed most.

The United States is also working with its partners to support free and fair electoral processes around the world. Autocrats no longer simply stuff ballot boxes on election day; they spend years tilting the playing field through cyber-hacking and voter suppression. Together, the leading global organizations that support electoral integrity, both within governments and outside them, have formed the Coalition for Securing Election Integrity to establish a consistent set of norms for what constitutes a free and fair election. The coalition will also help identify critical elections that the United States and other donor countries can help support and monitor.

A Chinese-built train in Athi River, Kenya, June 2022

Thomas Mukoya / Reuters

Finally, we are taking a much more aggressive and expansive approach to fighting corruption, going beyond addressing the symptoms—petty bribes and shady backroom deals—to tackle the root causes. In late 2021, for instance, the Biden administration announced the first U.S. strategy on anticorruption, which recognizes corruption as a national security threat and lays out new ways to tackle it. We are also working with partner governments to detect and root out corruption that is occurring on a grand international scale, abetted by an industry of shadowy facilitators. In Moldova, for instance, we helped the country's electoral commission to encourage greater transparency in financial disclosures so that external actors looking to exert influence over elections cannot hide their contributions. And in Bulgaria, Slovakia, and Slovenia, where USAID had previously closed its missions, we have restarted assistance to local institutions in part to support their efforts to curb corruption.

At the same time, we are raising the costs of corruption by bringing to light massive multinational schemes to hide illicit gains. We support global investigative units that unite forensic accountants and journalists to expose illicit dealings, including those detailed in the Luxembourg Leaks and the Pandora Papers. And as corruption grows more complex and global in scope, we are helping link investigative journalists across borders, including in Latin America, where such efforts have uncovered the mismanagement of nearly $300 million in public funding.

BACK FROM THE BRINK

Democracy is not in decline. Rather, it is under attack. Under attack from within by forces of division, ethno-nationalism, and repression. And under attack from without by autocratic governments and leaders who seek to exploit the inherent vulnerabilities of open societies by undermining election integrity, weaponizing corruption, and spreading disinformation to strengthen their own grip on power. Worse, these autocrats increasingly work together, sharing tricks and technologies to repress their populations at home and weaken democracy abroad.

To fend off this coordinated assault, the world's democracies must also work together. That is why in March 2023, the Biden administration will

host its second Democracy Summit—this time, held simultaneously in Costa Rica, the Netherlands, South Korea, the United States, and Zambia—where the world's democracies will take stock of their efforts and put forward new plans for democratic renewal.

After years of democratic backsliding, the world's autocrats are finally on the defensive. But to seize this moment and swing the pendulum of history back toward democratic rule, we must break down the wall that separates democratic advocacy from economic development work and demonstrate that democracies can deliver for their people. We must also redouble our efforts to counter digital surveillance and disinformation while upholding freedom of expression. And we must update the traditional democratic assistance playbook to help our partners respond to ever more sophisticated campaigns against them. Only then can we beat back antidemocratic forces and extend the reach of freedom.