

Democracy Under Stress

Is representative government in retreat worldwide?

Many democracies in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Latin America and Southeast Asia are veering toward autocracy, stalling or reversing decades of democratic progress. Leaders have postponed elections, jailed opponents, restricted personal and press freedoms and rewritten constitutions to legalize their actions. Freedoms have eroded in such countries as Russia, Venezuela, Turkey, the Philippines and Poland. In addition, Western democracies are struggling with economic, social and political instability, corruption, immigration and frustrated voters who have turned to populist-nationalist leaders for solutions. Donald Trump, elected president in a wave of populist fervor in the United States, has vowed to stop promoting democracy overseas and to withdraw from some treaties. Meanwhile, Russia seeks to undermine democratic institutions, free elections and liberal Western alliances, and China is wooing developing nations in an effort to show that countries can prosper without the constraints of democracy. Still, some observers are optimistic about democracy's future, saying that new democracies are emerging and others are showing surprising resilience.



Police detain a protester in Ankara, Turkey, on Sept. 14, 2017, during the trial of two teachers fired during a purge of suspected supporters of a failed coup last year against President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Autocratic leaders in a rising number of countries are restricting citizens' rights, reversing years of democratic progress.

THIS REPORT

INSIDE

THE ISSUES	871
BACKGROUND	878
CHRONOLOGY	879
CURRENT SITUATION	883
AT ISSUE	885
OUTLOOK	886
BIBLIOGRAPHY	890
THE NEXT STEP	891

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THE ISSUES

- 871 • Is China's authoritarian capitalism a viable alternative to democracy?
• Should the United States promote democracy abroad?
• Do the internet and social media strengthen and foster democracy?

BACKGROUND

- 878 **Greek and Christian Roots**
Athens in the sixth century B.C. became the birthplace of democracy.
- 878 **Democracy's First Wave**
The English colonies adopted democratic institutions.
- 882 **Cold War Competition**
After World War II, Western democracies opposed the Soviet Union and other totalitarian states.
- 882 **Democratic Backsliding**
The United States has struggled to promote democracy abroad, but many fledgling democracies have stumbled.

CURRENT SITUATION

- 883 **America First**
President Trump seeks foreign aid cuts and an end to most democracy-building efforts.
- 884 **Embattled Democracies**
Nations worldwide are facing challenges.

OUTLOOK

- 886 **Dangerous Populist Age**
Rising nationalism threatens democratic principles.

SIDEBARS AND GRAPHICS

- 872 **Status of Democracy in 2017**
The number of free countries has remained relatively stable since 2000, but democratic norms have eroded significantly in some countries.
- 876 **Newer Generations Less Supportive of Democracy**
People born after 1970 are less invested in democracy than those born in the 1930s and '40s.
- 879 **Chronology**
Key events since 1917.
- 880 **Venezuela Sinks into Dictatorship**
Critics say a power grab by President Nicolás Maduro threatens the once-thriving democracy.
- 885 **At Issue:**
Is democracy in retreat around the world?
- 889 **For More Information**
Organizations to contact.
- 890 **Bibliography**
Selected sources used.
- 891 **The Next Step**
Additional articles.
- 891 **Citing *CQ Researcher***
Sample bibliography formats.

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Democracies Under Stress

BY SUZANNE SATALINE

THE ISSUES

One day last May, after a government council in Venezuela announced it would redraft the constitution and delay elections, the bluish mist of tear gas drifted over the streets of Caracas, the capital. A line of young protesters — their T-shirts pulled up over their noses as makeshift gas masks — rushed toward riot police.

Shots rang out. Tear gas canisters exploded over the protesters' heads. Some demonstrators threw Molotov cocktails; others hid behind wooden shields. Engineering student Andres Muñoz said he was in the streets because the police were using force.

"I know that my main duty is to prepare myself for a better future, and that is precisely why I am protesting," said Muñoz, a pseudonym he assumed to protect against reprisals. "This is as much a part of my future as my studies."¹

Latin America's oldest democracy, with more than 30 million people, has devolved into chaos, with the opposition accusing Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro of dragging the oil-rich nation into a dictatorship by delaying elections, jailing opposition activists and pressuring lawmakers to overhaul the constitution. Scholars say the country's troubles started decades earlier, when a power-hungry populist leader mismanaged the state-run oil industry and suppressed citizens' rights. (See sidebar, p. 880.)

Like Venezuela, many of the world's representative democracies in recent decades have veered toward autocracy, stalling 30 years of democratic growth. Leaders in some countries in Eastern Europe, the Mediterranean, Latin America and Southeast Asia have postponed



President Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela, Latin America's oldest democracy, has been accused of dragging the oil-rich nation into dictatorship by delaying elections, jailing opposition activists and other actions. Experts blame the decline in democracy in Venezuela and elsewhere in part on resentment over rising immigration and public fury over social changes and economic hardships.

AFP/Getty Images/Rolando Schimidt

elections, jailed opposition activists, restricted human rights and press freedoms and rewritten constitutions to legalize their actions.

"There has been a dramatic shift in global power and behavior, whereby the most important authoritarian countries in the world — first China and Russia, second, Iran and a few others — are more powerful and, in particular, more assertive," says Larry Diamond, a professor of political science and sociology at Stanford University. "Democracy has lost some of its luster, enabling autocrats or elected leaders with authoritarian ambitions to delve into a narrative that says: 'Democracy doesn't work.' " Without forceful checks on authoritarian power, he adds, autocrats will "perceive little or no cost to ruling as nastily as they want."

Experts cite many reasons for the democratic retreat, including a global-

ized, increasingly competitive economy that has spurred some politicians to cater to populist fury over social changes and economic hardships. Citizens in democracies also are disheartened when elected officials are guilty of mismanagement and corruption. And, finally, some Western governments have shrunk their long-standing democracy-promotion programs.

Political scientists define a democracy as a political system that lets people or their representatives govern themselves using laws, rather than the authority of a single leader, monarch, party or military dictatorship. Healthy democracies generally have independent judiciaries, protect citizens' civil rights and hold fair elections.²

Between 1975 and 2006, the number of democracies grew, as dozens of Latin American and African autocracies and military dictatorships — and then former Soviet satellite states — adopted competitive, multiparty elections, independent judiciaries and civilian rule. By the mid-2000s, many of those fledgling democracies had begun to crumble.³ (See map, p. 872.)

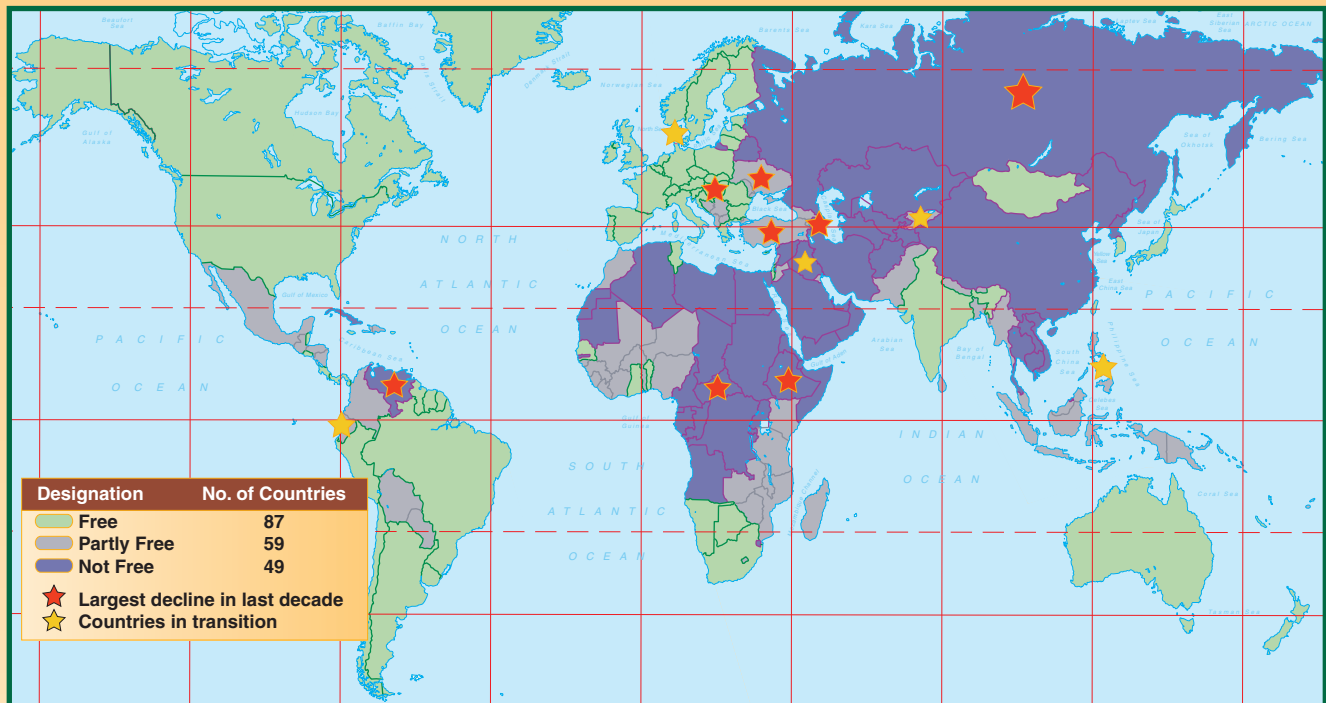
Then, starting in late 2010, a wave of protests spread across the Middle East, with citizens demanding democratic change, only to see their campaigns for broader rights devolve into civil wars or even more repression. In Egypt, for instance, authoritarian President Hosni Mubarak stepped down in 2011 after months of massive anti-government demonstrations, only to have his popularly elected successor, Mohamed Morsi, ousted by the military in 2013.⁴

Signs of faltering democratic institutions can be seen in a variety of countries or regions, including:

Status of Democracy in 2017

This year, a quarter of the world's 195 countries were listed as not free by Freedom House, a democracy advocacy group. The number of free countries has remained relatively stable since 2000 because as some countries slipped in the rankings — such as when Venezuela fell from partly free to not free this year — others, such as Brazil, Croatia and Tunisia, became more democratic.

A Snapshot of Global Democracy, 2017



Countries with Largest Decline in Freedom in the Past Decade

Country	Population (in millions)	Key leader(s)	Key Issues/Prognosis
Azerbaijan	9.9*	President Ilham Aliyev	Constitutional amendments extending the presidential term were passed in allegedly rigged voting.
Central African Republic	5.6	President Faustin-Archange Touadéra	The government is struggling to recover from conflict in 2013 that killed thousands and displaced millions.
Ethiopia	105.3	President Mulatu Teshome	Security forces have responded violently to peaceful protests.
Hungary	9.8*	President János Áder, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán	Orbán has accumulated unprecedented power while praising authoritarian countries such as China and Russia.

- Russia, where President Vladimir Putin has allowed officials to investigate rivals, prevented opponents from running for office and overseen constitutional revisions that will have enabled him to serve, if re-elected in 2018, as either president or prime minister for a total of 24 years.⁵

- Hungary and Poland, where cit-

izen fury grew over rapid social and economic changes wrought by globalization and the European Union's (EU) open-borders policies. That led many citizens to embrace populist leaders' proposals to limit immigrant and refugee rights. Once in power, those leaders have begun to dismantle democratic institutions.⁶

- The Philippines, where citizens and courts until recently have largely lauded President Rodrigo Duterte's vigilante campaign against drug abuse, which triggered thousands of extrajudicial killings of alleged drug sellers and users — a campaign President Trump has praised as an "unbelievable job."⁷

Countries with Largest Decline in Freedom in the Past Decade (Cont.)

Country	Population (in millions)	Key leader(s)	Key Issues/Prognosis
Russia	142*	President Vladimir Putin	Putin has curtailed media freedoms, ended regional elections and harassed political opponents.
Turkey	80.8*	President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan	Government crackdown after failed 2016 coup has led to mass arrests and firings of thousands of perceived enemies.
Ukraine	44*	President Petro Poroshenko	The government has struggled to maintain democratic gains and independence from Russia.
Venezuela	31.3*	President Nicolás Maduro	Maduro has delayed elections and pushed to rewrite the constitution to eliminate the opposition-led legislature.

Top Countries in Democratic Transition in 2017

Denmark	5.6	Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen	Parliament is considering restricting immigrant rights.
Ecuador	16.3	President Lenín Moreno	The vice president was recently jailed following a bribery investigation, and Moreno has accused his predecessor, Rafael Correa, of spying on him with hidden cameras.
Iraq	39.2	Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi	The government faces challenges from ISIS and tensions between Sunni and Shiite Muslims.
Kyrgyzstan	5.8	President Almazbek Atambayev	Atambayev's term is expiring, but he may try to become prime minister, a position strengthened in a December 2016 referendum. Sooronbai Jeenbekov, a protégé of Atambayev, was elected on Oct. 15 by a surprisingly large margin.
Philippines	104.2	President Rodrigo Duterte	Extrajudicial killings in Duterte's anti-drug crackdown have taken thousands of lives.
South Africa	54.8	President Jacob Zuma	Rival parties may clash as a new leader is chosen for the African National Congress.
Tanzania	53.9	President John Magufuli	Magufuli faces discontent from semi-autonomous Zanzibar. Threats, attacks and arrests target journalists frequently.
Zimbabwe	13.8	President Robert Mugabe	Politicians are jockeying for position in the struggle to succeed 93-year-old strongman Mugabe.

* July 2017 estimate by the CIA World Factbook

Sources: Elen Aghekyan et al., "Populists and Autocrats: The Dual Threat to Global Democracy," Freedom House, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/jkyw8ta>; The World Factbook, Central Intelligence Agency, <https://tinyurl.com/n27azxz>; "Hungary profile — Leaders," BBC News, June 14, 2017, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17382823; Roger Southall, "How ANC presidential elections trump South Africa's constitution," University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, June 2, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/y9kogat3>; "Tanzania country profile," BBC News, Sept. 21, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/y8u89c39>.

- Turkey, where a failed coup in 2016 prompted President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to jail tens of thousands of journalists, teachers and government employees he says opposed him.⁸

- Southeast Asia, where human-rights abuses and crackdowns on freedom are on the rise, notably in Myanmar. The military there has carried out what the United Nations has called ethnic cleansing, which has included rapes, beatings and killings of minority

Rohingyans after a militant group attacked police stations. The violence prompted about 500,000 members of the Muslim group to flee Buddhist-dominated Myanmar for neighboring Bangladesh.⁹

- The United States, where voters frustrated with what they call the Washington elite elected populist Republican Trump in 2016. As president he has repeatedly denigrated or attacked democratic institutions such as the press, judiciary, intelligence community and Congress.

- Various countries, such as China, Russia, Egypt and Cambodia, where authoritarian governments have blocked local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) from providing funds to promote democracy.¹⁰

"The single biggest factor" causing the decline in democracy, says Diamond, "is that the United States and Europe — the advanced industrial democracies — have pulled away from making the promotion and defense of

democracy a high priority.”

While some political scientists and pro-democracy groups have criticized Trump for not supporting U.S. democracy-building activities, others point out that the pullback from democracy promotion started under the Obama administration, which rejected the fervid nation-building that the George W. Bush administration began after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States.

Some experts say it may seem paradoxical, but the rise of Islamist terrorism has pushed Western countries to reject

ernment, as Western policymakers and political scientists had assumed they would, according to Joshua Kurlantzick, a Southeast Asia fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations think tank in Washington.¹¹

Some political scientists are more optimistic about the state of democracy around the world. “While pluralism is no longer on the rise, democracy has survived in a range of countries with highly unfavorable conditions for fostering democracy,” writes Lucan Ahmad Way, a professor of political science at the University of Toronto, pointing to Benin,

strains caused by globalization and the digital revolution.

“Today, China — and to a lesser extent other successful authoritarian capitalists — offer a viable alternative to the leading democracies,” wrote Kurlantzick. “In the wake of the global economic crisis and the dissatisfaction with democracy in many developing nations, leaders in Asia, Africa and Latin America are studying the Chinese model far more closely — a model that, eventually, will help undermine democracy in their countries.” Such authoritarian capitalists “pose the most serious challenge to democratic capitalism since the rise of communism and fascism in the 1920s and early 1930s,” he said.¹²

Democracies have crumbled in places where elected governments have not delivered basic public services and where corrupt judiciaries or police forces have shown bias, according to Diamond. Disillusioned citizens can become receptive to “anti-system” messages by populists promising quick fixes who then try to dismantle democratic structures once in power. When Poland joined the EU in 2004, experts hailed it as a post-communist triumph. Eleven years later, Poland’s populist and nationalist right-wing Law and Justice Party won the presidency and a parliamentary majority, and soon sought to control the courts.¹³

Worldwide, several social and economic trends are stressing democracies, says Diamond, and democratic institutions — such as the courts or a free press — have weakened in many developing and post-communist countries where conditions needed to sustain democracy are relatively weak.

In Europe, the EU’s open-borders policy for goods and people has allowed many Middle Eastern refugees and African migrants to enter, just as Islamist extremists carried out terror attacks in France, England and elsewhere. Populists fanned the resultant fear of those new arrivals into a seething antagonism toward immigrants and the liberal governments and interest groups that support them. That anger,



Getty Images/Mark Wilson

President Trump welcomes Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi to the White House on April 3, 2017. Some political scientists say that by making al-Sisi and other autocratic leaders among his first invitees to the White House, Trump has sent a strong signal to global leaders that the United States is no longer concerned about protecting democracy or human rights.

democracy promotion. The West needs the cooperation of certain autocratic regimes to fight terrorism. “The stomach for democracy promotion has lessened in the last 10 years,” says political scientist Brian Klaas, a fellow in comparative politics at the London School of Economics and the author of the 2017 book *The Despot’s Accomplish: How the West is Aiding and Abetting the Decline of Democracy*.

As officials in emerging democracies — such as Brazil, Indonesia, South Africa and Turkey — gained power, they often acted as cold realists instead of becoming powerful advocates for representative gov-

the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Ghana, Mongolia and Romania. In fact, he argues, the last decade could be viewed “as a period of democratic resilience.” (See “*At Issue*,” p. 885.)

Some democracy experts warn that a number of leaders are attracted to what they call the “authoritarian capitalist” model followed by China, which has achieved rapid economic growth since the 1980s without being hampered by free elections and independent courts. In contrast, many Western democracies have struggled to recover from the 2007-09 recession and are torn by factions and fighting, as their citizens reel from

in turn, made many middle- and lower-income citizens receptive to restrictions on immigrants' rights; in Hungary, the government decided in February to restrict new arrivals to government camps until their legal status is resolved.

Intelligence agencies say Russia has helped some of those anti-immigrant, populist candidates with money, propaganda and so-called disinformation campaigns that aimed to sow confusion during elections in Western democracies such as the United States, France and Germany.

As political scientists, policymakers and government officials evaluate the democratic landscape worldwide, here are some of the questions they are asking:

Is China's authoritarian capitalism a viable alternative to democracy?

Political theorist Daniel A. Bell, a philosophy professor at Tsinghua University in Beijing, touched off a controversy in 2015 when he said, "I disagree with the view that there's only one morally legitimate way of selecting leaders: one person, one vote."¹⁴

In his book published that year, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*, Bell said China's government, far from being an opaque tyranny, offered a "meritocratic" alternative to liberal, multiparty democracy. China chooses leaders based on experience and friendships, without the need for elections, confirmations, public hearings and U.S.-style popular approval. China's model, he said, has worked in a country with a population triple that of the United States.¹⁵

However, critics say China's so-called meritocracy is riddled with cronyism, and its economy — reliant on government spending and borrowing — could falter as economic growth slows and workers demand higher wages.

China's "authoritarian capitalism" began in the late 1970s when former Premier Deng Xiaoping introduced "socialism with Chinese characteristics." His policies sought to open China to some aspects of capitalism and international trade while

retaining the central government's control on individual rights. While economists have credited Deng's policies with making China the world's fastest-growing economy and raising the standard of living for hundreds of millions of citizens, others have criticized the communist government for blocking open elections, imprisoning critics, censoring the press and the internet and barring criticism of the government and its human rights record.¹⁶

Nevertheless, some political observers have questioned whether the China model proves that prosperity is possible without democracy. China's ability to complete major infrastructure projects, such as a nationwide high-speed rail network, without public hearings or debate showed a country could build wealth and a modern state without bickering legislatures, intrusive judiciaries and a probing, free media.¹⁷

Moreover, the West has reeled from the recession while China's system appeared to weather it well, although Chinese finances are not transparent. When Western governments were scrambling to save failing banks, China was investing billions worldwide — largely through government-financed construction projects, according to the Council on Foreign Relations' Kurlantzick. Under Beijing's form of capitalism, he wrote, the government controls certain industries, favors certain corporations and influences banks to finance certain firms. When Beijing wants closer ties with, say, Thailand or South Africa, it pressures its state-linked banks to lend money to Chinese companies working abroad, he explained.

However, many economists say China's economy rests on a shaky foundation that relies heavily on construction fueled by state bank loans and has produced gargantuan debt.¹⁸ Other experts say China's political system works well only in theory.

"There is massive factionalism, factional struggle, clientelism, patronage and corruption," wrote Timothy Garton Ash, an Oxford University historian and an expert on authoritarianism. Without

free discussion, China allows no consensus or negotiation, perpetuating a system that is, in fact, not meritocratic, he argued.¹⁹ President Xi, who came to power in 2012, has spent much of his first term investigating and even imprisoning party leaders accused of committing theft and amassing fortunes.

"It's actually going to be very difficult for this system to manage the extremely complex challenges it's facing as economic growth slows down, the supply of cheap labor is exhausted, and society becomes increasingly mature and educated, with higher aspirations," Ash wrote.²⁰

"They already are in a slowdown," says sociology professor Ho-Fung Hung at Johns Hopkins University, and signs point to growing unemployment. "Unemployment and discontent are the number-one thing they worry about." Political reforms, however, are "the last thing they think of," he says.

Andrew J. Nathan, a Columbia University political scientist, argued that liberal democracy is superior to China's authoritarian model not because of elections but because democracy's independent legislatures and courts hold leaders accountable. "The selection of leaders is very important, but what makes democracy better than authoritarianism is the checking of leaders by the freedom of others," he said. Such limits on power do not exist in China. Rather, "China views democracy promotion, human-rights diplomacy, humanitarian interventions, and the rise of international criminal law . . . as efforts by the Western powers to weaken rivals."²¹

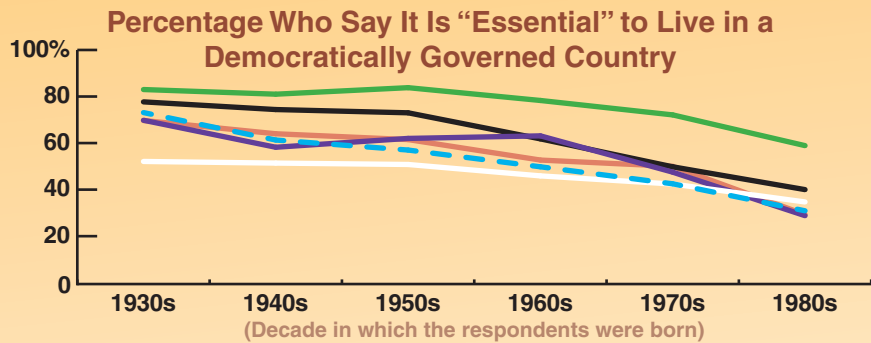
In a notable example, when the U.N. Security Council debated a resolution in 2014 to refer the Syrian civil war and crimes documented there to the International Criminal Court, China joined Russia to veto the move. A nation's internal affairs, Chinese officials argued, are not concerns of other countries.²²

Should the United States promote democracy abroad?

The State Department says its mission is "to shape and sustain a peaceful,

Newer Generations Less Supportive of Democracy

Older generations — born in the 1930s and '40s — are far more supportive of democracy than generations born after 1970, according to surveys conducted in some of the world's oldest democracies.



Sources: Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, “The Signs of Deconsolidation,” *Journal of Democracy*, January 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/yccgusdx>; “Online Data Analysis,” *World Values Survey*, combined data from (2005-2009 and 2010-2014), <https://tinyurl.com/gl7elm6>

— Sweden
— Australia
— United States
— Great Britain
— New Zealand
— Netherlands

prosperous, just and democratic world and foster conditions for stability and progress.”²³ Democracy promotion has been a key U.S. foreign policy goal since the end of World War II, when the United States helped to rebuild former foes Germany and Japan, turning them into powerful democratic allies.

Other U.S. agencies, including the U.S. Agency for International Development, the Millennium Challenge Corp. and the Middle East Partnership Initiative, also strive to promote democracy.²⁴

After the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, President George W. Bush vowed to create allies in the Middle East by turning autocratic governments into democracies, especially in Iraq and Afghanistan. Those efforts, which continued during Barack Obama’s presidency, look to be in peril.

President Trump has proposed an “America first” policy in which the United States focuses on its own goals and does not embroil itself in civil affairs abroad or conduct engage in so-called nation-building. When Trump announced plans to send more troops to Afghanistan, he pointedly rejected the efforts of the

Bush administration, saying, “We are not nation-building again. We are killing terrorists.”²⁵

To carry out Trump’s agenda, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson considered deleting any mention of promoting democracy from the State Department’s mission statement.²⁶ He also proposed slashing spending for programs that promote democratic governance to \$1.6 billion in 2018 — down from \$2.3 billion in 2016. The proposal “reflects the president’s ‘America First’ agenda that prioritizes the well-being of Americans, bolsters U.S. national security, secures our borders and advances U.S. economic interests,” Tillerson said.²⁷

Some political scientists say Trump’s actions and his decision to welcome several autocratic leaders — Philippine strongman Duterte, Turkey’s Erdogan and Egyptian leader Abdel Fattah al-Sisi — as some of his first visitors to the White House sent a strong signal to global leaders that the United States is no longer concerned about protecting democracy or human rights.

Yet, Trump’s supporters point out that he has softened his isolationist

tendencies with regard to Venezuela. On Aug. 25, the president imposed sanctions on anyone sending funds that fuel President Maduro’s dictatorship.²⁸ In a Sept. 19 address to the United Nations, Trump urged world leaders to help restore “democracy and political freedoms” in Venezuela, adding, “We are prepared to take further action if the government . . . persists on its path to impose authoritarian rule on the Venezuelan people.”²⁹

Other political scientists say U.S. skittishness about democracy promotion began in the Obama administration, after what critics called the post-9/11 debacles in Iraq and Afghanistan. Political scientist Klaas said halfhearted attempts to build a democracy in Iraq fed long-standing Muslim rivalries — which had been suppressed by dictator Saddam Hussein — that exploded into a civil war.³⁰ Such unintended consequences, he said, contributed to a sense in the West that “there are so many fires around the world, maybe we shouldn’t make another one.”

Reuel Marc Gerecht, a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a conservative Washington think tank, said, “Barack Obama came into office mistrusting American hegemony, which had led us into Afghanistan and Iraq.” Obama believed in “diplomacy untethered from the use of force,” he continued, and tried to persuade Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to leave office and to smooth over relations with Russia’s Putin. But U.S. foes saw his outreach as weakness, Gerecht said.³¹

The Obama administration slashed U.S. spending to promote democratic institutions and human rights, from \$3.5 billion to \$1.9 billion annually between 2010 and 2015, before increasing it to \$2.3 billion in 2016, according to Pippa Norris, director of the Electoral Integrity Project, a program at Harvard University and the University of Sydney that assesses elections worldwide. Because the United States has led the spread of democracy and human rights over

the years, she said, “any abandonment of this work sends damaging diplomatic signals about America’s priorities.” ³²

While promoting democracy has enjoyed bipartisan support, some current members of Congress question the effectiveness and appropriateness of past democracy efforts.

“Creating reasonably effective democracies took centuries in the West, and it was often a highly contentious — even violent — process,” wrote Stephen M. Walt, a professor of international relations at Harvard University. “To believe the U.S. military could export democracy quickly and cheaply required a degree of hubris that is still breathtaking to recall.” ³³

Bruce Fein, a constitutional attorney and conservative activist, wrote that democratically elected leaders “can be every bit as tyrannical and aggressive towards the United States as unelected dictators,” citing the election of Islamist extremist leaders of Hamas in the West Bank or the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. If a country is “insufficiently mature, literate and homogeneous,” democracy degenerates into “majoritarian, sectarian or tribal tyrannies,” he continued. ³⁴

Klaas counters that when America abandons democracy promotion it leaves a vacuum in unstable states that Moscow and Beijing can fill. “It’s a global foreign policy battle, and the West’s losses are China’s and Russia’s gains,” he said. ³⁵

Do the internet and social media strengthen and foster democracy?

The internet’s power to spread democracy has been undeniable.

Before the wave of popular revolts known as the Arab Spring shook the Middle East in 2010-11, activists, writers and citizens used digital media to help Tunisians, Egyptians, Libyans, Yemenis, Bahrainis, Syrians and others mobilize for political change. Digital media melded journalism, citizen reporting, activism and entertainment, wrote Jeff Ghannam, a journalist and lawyer with the Center for International Media Assistance, a U.S.-government funded nonprofit that pro-



AFP/Getty Images/Noel Celis

Nanette Castillo grieves beside her son Aldrin, an alleged drug user killed by unidentified assailants, in Manila, Philippines, on Oct. 3, 2017. President Trump has told Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte he is doing an “unbelievable job” with his anti-drug campaign, which has resulted in thousands of extrajudicial killings of alleged drug sellers and users.

motes independent media abroad. When Syria barred international news organizations from covering the civil war there, media companies used images and videos sent through social media from citizen journalists. Private, upstart channels offered alternatives to state TV. ³⁶

“To be sure, these were not Facebook or Twitter revolutions, however much cyberutopians would like them to be,” Ghannam wrote. “However, the internet’s potential as a tool that can help the process of democratization is undeniable.”

In Russia, opposition leader Alexei Navalny’s Progress Party has aired investigative reports on YouTube for more than a year documenting the wealth of allies of former President Dmitri Medvedev and Putin. ³⁷ Last spring, after a video accused Medvedev of using friends’ charities to hide riches, including mansions and yachts, he apparently accumulated while in office, tens of thousands of citizens demonstrated nationwide. ³⁸

In China, social media has allowed citizens to air opinions and grievances, despite that nation’s heavy censorship. After the July death of Nobel Peace Prize recipient Liu Xiaobo — whom the authorities refused to release despite his advanced-stage cancer — citizens flocked online

to pay tribute. Censors quickly scrubbed the comments from social media forums. In 2015, millions of residents downloaded a damning documentary about pollution until censors blocked it. ³⁹

It is unclear, some academics say, whether such online actions drive long-term commitment to reform. While social media enables organizers to quickly pull off large protests, such actions do not necessarily build permanent opposition movements, according to Zeynep Tufekci, an associate professor of sociology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and Christopher Wilson, co-founder of The Engine Room, a Web-based democracy-promotion activist group. Previous large demonstrations, such as the 1963 civil rights March on Washington, required months of preparation that helped to strengthen the movement, they wrote, and helped organizers build future campaigns, such as voter-registration drives in the South. ⁴⁰

Several recent social movements have struggled to achieve much beyond large protests. In 2011, Occupy Wall Street activists staged demonstrations in hundreds of cities in more than 80 countries, protesting the role large banks and financial firms played in causing the 2007-08

recession, but few things changed, despite the large crowds. Likewise, protests in Istanbul in 2013 and Hong Kong in 2014 — both of which sought greater political freedoms — did not produce much if any concrete change.⁴¹

Protests should be only a first, potential step, wrote Tufekci and Wilson, because without follow-up, such as building coalitions, officials will not see such movements as threats.

More ominously, according to Ghanam, the internet can be used by authoritarian governments. The online world operates in the open and is easily viewed by the government and police, he said. China and Russia have detained activists, sometimes in secret, based on what they have written online.⁴²

Social media also enables authoritarian governments to undermine democracy, such as efforts by the Russian government to sway the 2016 U.S. election, says Diamond. Governments also can pelt social media with propaganda, fake news and negative publicity that can shape voters' opinions. Some governments are using propaganda, fake news and disinformation "as offensive tools against democracy," says Marc F. Plattner, founding co-editor of the *Journal of Democracy*.

"On the whole, the internet is a plus for freedom, but we're only now starting to grapple with the negative impact," says Arch Puddington, a distinguished fellow for democracy studies at Freedom House, a nonprofit in New York that publishes an annual survey on the status of freedom around the world. "I would expect 10 years from now we are going to see many societies with laws and policies in place that will make the internet less free-wheeling than it is. And some will be enacted by democracies."

Courtney Radsch, advocacy director for the Committee to Protect Journalists, worries that as countries move to ban hate speech, they may end up suppressing free speech. "Governments are calling on private companies to remove content and accounts," she says. "Of course they are going to remove more content than

they should." Governments provide little if any guidance on this, she adds.

In April, the German cabinet passed a bill to combat disinformation and hate speech on social media. It requires media companies to remove hate speech 24 hours after they receive a complaint and to block any other content deemed offensive within seven days. Jewish groups hailed the law. "Jews are exposed to anti-Semitic hatred in social networks on a daily basis," said the Central Council of Jews, a federation of German Jewish organizations. "This law is the logical consequence to effectively limit hate speech." Facebook and free speech activists said the law could smother all kinds of speech. "This law as it stands now will not improve efforts to tackle this important societal problem," Facebook said in a statement.⁴³

"Technology moves so fast," says Plattner. "There's a kind of arms race between the people who want to create greater freedom and people who want to create greater oppression." ■

BACKGROUND

Greek and Christian Roots

Democracy dates to the citizen states and philosophers of ancient Greece. In Athens in the sixth century B.C., as citizens chafed under rule by the elite, philosophers argued that wider citizen participation would best secure the public's loyalty and ensure stability.⁴⁴

The Roman Empire experimented with popular governance, but eventually supplanted it with imperial power. As it did so, a countervailing force emerged that challenged slavery and pagan beliefs — a new religion called Christianity. The influential Christian theologian Augustine argued that community bonds created a moral force for self-governance.

However, after Germanic tribes overran the empire's western flank in the fifth century A.D., the notion of citizen power nearly vanished for several centuries.⁴⁵

In 1215, under pressure from rebel barons, King John in England reluctantly accepted the Magna Carta, which established the notion that a king was subject to laws and that his power could be checked. It also enshrined individual rights, especially the principle of habeas corpus, which allowed a person to challenge his imprisonment in court.⁴⁶

Since its early days, Christianity had promoted the idea that kings were anointed by God. Catholic and Protestant political thinkers began contesting the so-called divine right of kings in the 16th century, and the notion that subjects' could question authority spread during the Protestant Reformation. Opponents of Roman Catholicism challenged religious hierarchy and backed the right of ordinary people to make decisions in their churches and, ultimately, in government.⁴⁷

The concept of democratic rule re-emerged in 17th-century England amid civil wars, as King James — and later his son, Charles I — clashed with Parliament over taxes, religion and other issues. Religious radicals known as Puritans, who wanted to "purify" Anglicanism, fled to North America starting in the early 1600s, where they established the Massachusetts Bay Colony.⁴⁸

Democracy's First Wave

As the English colonies in North America grew in the 17th and 18th centuries, colonial assemblies gained power and stature. These early democratic institutions levied taxes and regulated colonial life. In the 1760s, when British officials attempted to tighten imperial control and tax the colonists, they ignited a rebellion.⁴⁹

On July 4, 1776, the Continental Congress declared the colonies "free

Continued on p. 880

Chronology

1900s-1970s

Dictatorships rise and fall; Western democratic alliances are established.

1917

Russia establishes the world's first government based on communism.

1933

Adolf Hitler seizes power in Germany, setting stage for World War II.

1945

World War II ends; 50 countries form the United Nations.

1947

India wins independence from Britain and later becomes the world's largest democracy.

1948

South Africa establishes apartheid to guarantee white dominance.

1949

Mao Zedong transforms China into a communist state.

1952

European Coal and Steel Community establishes an economic and political alliance that evolves into the European Union in 1993.

1956

Soviet tanks crush pro-democracy uprising in Hungary, killing more than 3,000.

1961

Soviet Union builds the Berlin Wall, separating East Germany from the city's democratic Western half.

1975

Thirty-five nations sign the Helsinki Accords to improve relations between communist countries and the West.

1980s-1990s

Democracy rises in former Soviet-controlled nations.

1989

Chinese soldiers gun down hundreds of pro-democracy protesters in Beijing's Tiananmen Square. . . . The Berlin Wall falls. . . . Pro-democracy demonstrations erupt in Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania.

1990

Lech Walesa becomes Poland's first democratically elected president, marking the end of Soviet control.

1991

Soviet Union is dissolved. The last president, Mikhail Gorbachev, hands power to Russian Federation President Boris Yeltsin. The country struggles to establish democratic institutions.

1994

Anti-apartheid leader Nelson Mandela is released from prison after 29 years and becomes the first democratically elected president of South Africa.

1998

Venezuelans elect populist Hugo Chávez as president; he installs a socialist government.

2000-Present

Democracies falter in Russia, Venezuela and Eastern Europe.

2000

Russia elects former KGB agent Vladimir Putin as president. He consolidates control over the media and courts and ends regional elections.

2009

Venezuelan voters end presidential term limits, letting Chávez rule indefinitely.

2010

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party take power; constitutional changes give him control over courts.

2011

A Tunisian street vendor commits suicide to protest government oppression, sparking the so-called Arab Spring uprisings in Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Bahrain and Syria that unseat authoritarian leaders, yet new ones replace them.

2014

Thai military suspends the country's constitution and ends democratic rule.

2015

Poland's right-wing Law and Justice Party controls parliament and weakens the constitutional court, politicizes the civil service and restricts the media.

2016

After quelling an attempted coup, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan blames an old opponent and arrests about 45,000 people, including teachers, journalists and government workers.

2017

Newly elected U.S. President Donald Trump attacks the press, judicial system, Congress and intelligence agencies, disparages NATO and compliments Putin and Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, who directs a murderous anti-drug campaign that kills thousands of suspected drug dealers and users.

Venezuela Sinks into Dictatorship

Critics say President Nicolás Maduro threatens the once-thriving democracy.

In Venezuela, Latin America's oldest democracy and the country with the world's largest proven oil reserves, grocers' shelves are bare, corruption is rampant and democratic institutions are in tatters.¹

Venezuela's stunning descent in recent years from a wealthy, stable democracy into a nation gripped by chaos and political intrigue has led to concerns that the country of more than 30 million people could fall permanently into dictatorship.

Elections held Oct. 16 threatened to deepen the country's political crisis by strengthening the ruling Socialist United Party, which won at least 17 of 23 governorships, a result some opposition leaders and the U.S. State Department blamed on fraud.²

The shift began under the late Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez, an autocrat elected in a wave of populist enthusiasm in the late 1990s, and continues under his successor, Nicolás Maduro, who has tried to dissolve the country's legislature and rewrite the constitution.

Maduro wants "to eliminate not only our democracy but any institution that still survives in Venezuela," opposition leader Julio Borges said recently.³

Ongoing mass demonstrations that began in the spring led to the deaths of about 125 people (as of August), and more than 5,051 people had been arbitrarily detained, according to a United Nations report.⁴ Military tribunals have prosecuted hundreds of people protesting Maduro's socialist government on charges that could send them to prison for 30 years.

The protesters say Maduro became more authoritarian as the country's economy deteriorated due to collapsing world oil prices and mismanagement of the state-owned oil industry. Falling oil revenues have triggered massive government borrowing, and production of domestic goods has plummeted. Desperation has grown as food and medicine have run low, creating what Human Rights Watch has called a "humanitarian crisis."⁵

The devolution of Venezuela's democracy is an example of how some longtime democracies have faltered in recent years when authoritarian leaders, buoyed by populist movements, have begun dismantling constitutional protections and destroying checks on their power, usually amid massive economic problems.

But Maduro has not dismantled democracy on his own, according to some of his critics. They say Chávez, who died in 2013, had expanded presidential powers and weakened democracy by, among other things, limiting press freedom and the right to protest.⁶ "Democracy was on thin ice by the time [Maduro] came to power," says Michael McCarthy, a research fellow at the Center for Latin American and Latino Studies at American University in Washington.

The conditions that led to Chávez's election in 1998 had begun decades earlier. In the 1970s Venezuela was awash in oil money, making it the richest country in Latin America. But after the oil industry was nationalized in 1976, mismanagement of the industry threw the economy into disarray, with inflation and foreign debt rising sharply in the 1980s and '90s.⁷

When world oil prices fell in the 1980s, Venezuela's government imposed austerity measures. Hundreds of people died in anti-government protests.⁸ "From that point on, the system was essentially morally bankrupt," McCarthy says.

Chávez was elected in 1998 after promising to clean up government waste, graft and patronage, redistribute the country's oil wealth and boost social program budgets.⁹ He spent oil revenue on education, housing, health and food programs — a component of his wildly popular leftist governing philosophy. The share of households in poverty fell from 55 percent in 1995 to 26 percent in 2009. Unemployment fell from 15 percent when Chávez took office to under 8 percent in June 2009.¹⁰

Chávez also clashed with the national oil company, Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA), which he said was controlled by foreigners and hid profits. Production fell after Chávez cut the company's budget for oil well maintenance. In 2002, Chávez fired at least 20,000 striking PDVSA workers and replaced them with political loyalists. Production fell even lower.¹¹ He also directed the state to take over food producers, fertilizer plants, farmland, banks, manufacturers, gold production, telecommunications and utilities.¹²

Meanwhile, Chávez capitalized on populist anger by making other sweeping changes. He suspended Supreme Court judges who opposed him and packed the court with allies.¹³ A constitutional assembly amended the constitution to eliminate the Senate and authorize Chávez to recall legislators.

Continued from p. 878

and independent states," stating in the Declaration of Independence that governments derive "their just powers from the consent of the governed" and that "whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it."⁵⁰

After independence was won, the American states in 1787 established a federal government that shared powers among a president, a congress and a judiciary. The American experiment inspired other nations, including France, where citizens launched a revolution of their own in 1789. It ended with a constitution that established the French

Republic and a legislature. Democracy grew in Europe over the next century, especially after the Hapsburg and Hohenzollern empires collapsed.⁵¹

World War I, and the overthrow of Russia's empire, marked a dire moment for democratic government. The Bolsheviks, the radical wing of a labor party whose members followed the

"The state was gradually eroding the checks and balances," according to Javier Corrales, a political science professor at Amherst College in Massachusetts. "Once you have no way of controlling . . . the executive [by] blocking a spending [bill] or suing him through the courts, the space is completely open for corruption."¹⁴

When Chavez dies in 2013, Maduro assumed power and was elected as Chavez's successor in a special election. By then, the country was struggling to pay its debts, as world oil prices were tumbling again. His allies have tried to disband the nation's opposition-controlled legislature, first by using the court system. When that failed, Maduro planned to create a new political body, a Constituent Assembly, which would rewrite the country's constitution, grant unlimited power to officials loyal to him and dismantle or reorganize the branches of government viewed as disloyal.¹⁵

In July, more than 98 percent of Venezuelan voters signaled their disapproval of the Constituent Assembly proposal in a voting exercise, called a popular consultation, organized by opposition parties.¹⁶ Despite the staggering display of public disapproval, the Constituent Assembly was formed after a July 30 vote to elect assembly members. Venezuelans were not given the option to reject the assembly.

Since then the Constituent Assembly has voided the opposition-led legislature and granted itself full authority to write and pass legislation, consolidating control for Maduro's Party.¹⁷

In July the Trump administration imposed economic sanctions on Venezuela in an effort to block Maduro from altering the nation's constitution, which U.S. officials said could doom Venezuelan democracy.¹⁸ Two months later, Trump attacked Maduro in a speech at the United Nations.

One country leapt to the South American nation's defense — China — an authoritarian communist country.¹⁹

— Suzanne Sataline

¹ Max Fisher and Amanda Taub, "How Does Populism Turn Authoritarian? Venezuela Is a Case in Point," *The New York Times*, April 1, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/mkufv9w>; Juan Carlos Garzón and Robert Muggah, "Venezuela's raging homicide epidemic is going unrecorded," *Los Angeles Times*, March 31, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/y73cl7zb>; Jessica Dillinger, "The World's Largest Oil Reserves By Country," *World Atlas*, updated April 25, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/hp7f72a>.

² Fabiola Sanchez and Christine Armario, "Venezuela opposition looks for answers after election loss," The Associated Press, *The Washington Post*, Oct. 16, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/y7ovwtxx>.

³ Mariana Zuñiga and Nick Miroff, "Maduro wants to rewrite Venezuela's constitution. That's rocket fuel on the fire," *The Washington Post*, June 10, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/y86bz96l>.

⁴ Brian Ellsworth and Stephanie Nebehay, "U.N. decries excessive force in Venezuela's crackdown on protests," Reuters, Aug. 8, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/yb9m8nqc>.

⁵ Mercy Benzaquen, "How Food in Venezuela Went From Subsidized to Scarce," *The New York Times*, July 16, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/y8nyd98h>; "World Report 2017: Venezuela, Events of 2016," Human Rights Watch, <https://tinyurl.com/y7gsyrkc>.

⁶ "Venezuela: Chávez's Authoritarian Legacy, Dramatic Concentration of Power and Open Disregard for Basic Human Rights," Human Rights Watch, March 5, 2013, <https://tinyurl.com/y9sfapow>.

⁷ Javier Corrales, "Venezuela in the 1980s, the 1990s and beyond, Why Citizen-Detached Parties Imperil Economic Governance," *ReVista: The Harvard Review of Latin America*, Harvard University, 1999, <https://tinyurl.com/y8n4gdb4>; Alejandro Velasco, "Explaining the Venezuelan Crisis," North American Congress on Latin America, Oct. 28, 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/y73bldae>; Henkel Garcia U, "Inside Venezuela's economic collapse," *The Conversation*, July 10, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/ybkdcj4x>.

⁸ Simon Romero, "Carlos Andrés Pérez, Former President of Venezuela, Dies at 88," *The New York Times*, Dec. 26, 2010, <https://tinyurl.com/y7rz29mq>.

⁹ Fisher and Taub, *op. cit.*; Brian A. Nelson, "Hugo Chávez, President of Venezuela," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, undated, <https://tinyurl.com/ya9kkemg>.

¹⁰ Oscar Guardiola-Rivera, "Hugo Chávez kept his promise to the people of Venezuela," *The Guardian*, March 5, 2013, <https://tinyurl.com/ybh2lmsq>.

¹¹ Scott Tong, "How oil-rich Venezuela ended up with a miserable economy," Marketplace.org, April 5, 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/y7okfj2o>.

¹² Steve Mufson, "Conoco, Exxon Exit Venezuela Oil Deals," *The Washington Post*, June 27, 2007, <https://tinyurl.com/ybargmbe>; Tamsin Carlisle, "Venezuela seizes 60 firms," *The National*, May 9, 2009, <https://tinyurl.com/ybwfwl4u>.

¹³ Fisher and Taub, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ Javier Corrales, "The Authoritarian Resurgence, Autocratic Legalism in Venezuela," *Journal of Democracy*, April 2015, Volume 26, No. 2, <https://tinyurl.com/ya77n9my>.

¹⁵ Nicholas Casey, "As Venezuela Prepares to Vote, Some Fear an End to Democracy," *The New York Times*, July 29, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/yan8r6lx>.

¹⁶ Ana Vanessa Herrero and Ernestor Londoño, "Venezuelans Rebuke Their President by a Staggering Margin," *The New York Times*, July 16, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/ycljcktu>.

¹⁷ Nicholas Casey, "Venezuela's New, Powerful Assembly Takes Over Legislature's Duties," *The New York Times*, Aug. 18, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/y9xvnnpx>.

¹⁸ Tracey Wilkinson, "Trump administration hits Venezuela with more sanctions, targeting civilian and military officials," *Los Angeles Times*, July 26, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/ya92njc4>.

¹⁹ "China offers support for strife-torn Venezuela at United Nations," Reuters, Sept. 20, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/ya7j6k3e>.

writings of German philosopher Karl Marx, overthrew the monarchy. They created the Soviet Union, the world's first communist state. While supporters talked of the wonders of a worker-led government, the system became a brutal dictatorship that eventually killed tens of millions of citizens through starvation, imprisonment and mass executions.

In the 1920s and '30s, with the brutalities almost unknown beyond Soviet borders, people elsewhere — craving stability and economic opportunity, fearful of immigrants and invasions and swayed by powerful propaganda — embraced the idealism of communism, as well as fascism and militarism. Such ideologies soon morphed into autocratic regimes. Fascist

Benito Mussolini overthrew a corrupt democracy in Italy. Meanwhile, authoritarianism spread to Poland and the Baltics, whose fledgling post-World War I governments collapsed after military coups.⁵²

Adolf Hitler, leader of the National Socialist German Workers' (Nazi) Party, called democracy "a monstrosity of filth and fire" in his book *Mein Kampf*.⁵³

After seizing power in Germany and eliminating most citizen protections, Hitler established the Third Reich and launched invasions in late 1939 that led to World War II. Hitler's conquest of most of Europe obliterated the Continent's democracies, including France's, and eventually killed millions, including 6 million Jews in the Holocaust.

Cold War Competition

With the Allies' victory in World War II in 1945, democracy returned to Europe and Japan. The United States helped rebuild ravaged Western economies through the Marshall Plan, which delivered more than \$13 billion (about \$132 billion today) in aid to European countries. In Japan, U.S. occupying forces imposed military, political, economic and social reforms. Former foes West Germany and Japan eventually flourished as democracies.⁵⁴

The war also ended Europe's colonial regimes, creating many new democracies in Africa and Asia. In Greece, Spain, Argentina, Brazil and Chile, once-autocratic regimes expanded voting rights and civil freedoms.⁵⁵

Soon after the war's end, 50 countries formed the United Nations, which aimed to prevent future wars and promote democratic governments and human rights, a goal laid out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. At about the same time, several European nations formed an economic and political alliance, the European Coal and Steel Community, which eventually became the European Union (EU).⁵⁶

In 1949 Western democracies formed a military alliance, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), to match the Soviet Union's united front.

But democracy had formidable foes. A civil war in China ended in 1949 with the victory of Mao Zedong's communist forces, which proceeded to build a one-party state that essentially turned citizens into spies and informers. Tens

of millions died of starvation during the so-called Great Leap Forward, an economic "modernization" effort in 1958-61. Many more died during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), as the government tried to eliminate "enemies of the revolution."⁵⁷

The Soviet Union, meanwhile, had established impenetrable borders, dubbed the Iron Curtain, between its satellite states in Eastern Europe and democratic Western Europe. Soviet forces tried to block citizens from fleeing the communist-run states in the East to the democratic West; violators were often shot dead. The Berlin Wall that separated East and West Berlin remained in place until citizens tore it down in 1989.⁵⁸

The "Cold War" between nations allied with the United States or the Soviets fanned proxy wars. Civil war erupted in Korea in the early 1950s and Vietnam in the 1960s and '70s. In Africa and Latin America, many former colonial states devolved into military dictatorships, supported by the United States, as they sought to defeat socialist uprisings supported by the Soviet Union or Communist China.⁵⁹

In the late 1980s, the Soviet Union's mounting economic problems — fueled by an inefficient, centrally managed economy — prompted the country to borrow massive amounts of money. Former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev announced new policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, or openness and reform. With more freedom to discuss and organize, discontent within the Soviet bloc grew.⁶⁰

On June 12, 1987, in a famous speech in front of West Berlin's Brandenburg Gate, part of the Berlin Wall, U.S. President Ronald Reagan challenged Gorbachev to give his people freedom and "tear down this wall!"⁶¹

Rather than Reagan's words, the Soviet bloc's faltering economy created the greatest pressure on Gorbachev. As the Soviet Union competed with the United States in expanding its nuclear defenses, it robbed its manufacturing economy of crucial resources.⁶² A politically weak-

ened Gorbachev did not interfere when opposition movements arose in satellite states, such as Poland's Solidarity labor movement, which won seats in the Polish legislature in 1989.⁶³

After Poland and Hungary gained some freedoms, citizens in East Germany agitated for their government to open the border to the West, sealed since 1961 and manned by armed guards. When the gates opened, suddenly on Nov. 9, 1989, a tide of people crossed to the West, unmolested by the border guards.⁶⁴ Two years later, communist hardliners tried to depose Gorbachev in a coup, but military officers and leaders from the autonomous republics refused to cooperate, and on Dec. 31, 1991, the Soviet Union was dissolved. The new leader, President Boris Yeltsin, steered the Russian Federation toward a rudimentary democracy.⁶⁵

Former Soviet republics — Ukraine, Latvia, Lithuania and others — quickly voted for independence. By 2004, after several peaceful protests — the "color revolutions" — voters in former Soviet bloc countries chose new presidents. Many of the emerging states formed democratic governments to qualify for EU membership in what some called the reunification of Europe.⁶⁶

Democratic Backsliding

In the late 1970s, Democratic President Jimmy Carter sought to make human rights central to foreign policy and linked economic and military aid to countries' human-rights records.⁶⁷

The number of world democracies expanded throughout the 1980s and '90s, especially after the Soviet Union ended.

Republican President George W. Bush aggressively promoted democracy after Islamist terrorists attacked the United States on Sept. 11, 2001, arguing that democracy would help alleviate anti-U.S. sentiment in the Middle East and block further attacks on the West.

Yet, the U.S. democracy-promotion campaign of the 2000s had inconsistencies, just as it had during the Cold War, when the United States sometimes supported military dictators who opposed communism. The Bush administration spent billions of dollars, and lost thousands of lives, trying to establish democratic institutions in Iraq, Afghanistan and other nations, while retaining close ties with repressive regimes such as Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of most of the 9/11 terrorists.⁶⁸

However, Bush's efforts to fight Islamist extremists while building new democratic nations in the Middle East largely failed, says author Klaas. Beginning in December 2010, protests and rallies erupted in several Arab states, largely powered by young people's frustration with their autocratic governments and poor job prospects. In Cairo, huge crowds filled the streets for months, demanding that Egyptian President Mubarak resign.⁶⁹

However, the Arab Spring protests did not usher in vast democratic change, except in Tunisia, where democracy remains a work in progress. Egypt elected the religiously conservative Morsi, who was ousted in 2013 by the military, led by Sisi. Since becoming president, Sisi has imposed even more repressive measures than Mubarak's. In Syria, the military remained loyal to Assad and is used as a tool of sectarian power.⁷⁰

During the presidential campaign and after his election in 2008, Democrat Barack Obama vowed to end U.S. involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, and promoted a policy of restraint in the region as violence grew.

Meanwhile, Putin, first elected president of Russia in 2000, had instituted many changes to ensure his power. His government took over television stations, curtailed media freedoms, ended regional elections, imposed harsh penalties on protesters and harassed political opponents. Many of Putin's critics were killed or died under suspicious circumstances. In 2014, when Ukrainian protests

prodded that country's president to resign, Putin annexed the country's eastern portion, claiming it was historically part of Russia. In response, the West imposed sanctions that, coupled with the collapse of world prices for oil (Russia's major export), severely damaged the Russian economy.⁷¹

Democracy and human rights faced challenges elsewhere in the West. In Britain, voters backed restrictions on immigrants, as nationalists who opposed the EU's open-border policies blamed new arrivals for taking jobs and dragging down the U.K. economy. In June 2016, British voters stunned the establishment by backing the U.K.'s exit from the European Union.⁷²

Five months later the Republican nominee for president, billionaire real estate developer and political neophyte Donald Trump, won an upset victory over Democrat Hillary Clinton. Trump ran a campaign infused with nationalistic slogans that attacked immigrants and refugees, denigrated NATO and vowed to place American interests before those of other nations. In office, he has lambasted Congress and the judiciary, sought to temporarily ban immigrants from certain Muslim-majority nations from entering the United States, and suggested that the press be restricted. His policies prompted many scholars to warn that democracy in America was threatened.

Shortly after his election, the U.S. intelligence community concluded that Russia's intelligence services had meddled in the 2016 presidential election through hacking and planting of "fake news" online that damaged Clinton and favored Trump. In addition, according to the spy agencies, Trump campaign associates communicated with Russians during the election in ways that caused "concern."⁷³ Senate and House committees opened investigations into the Russian interference.

In May, Trump fired FBI Director James B. Comey, who said later that the president had pressed him to state publicly that Trump was not under in-

vestigation. That month, the Justice Department appointed former FBI Director Robert S. Mueller III to investigate possible ties between the Trump campaign and Russian officials.⁷⁴ ■

CURRENT SITUATION

America First

Since taking office, President Trump has insisted that the United States not try to recreate countries "in our own image" or impose democratic policies on others. The administration also proposed cutting aid to developing nations by one-third and diverting the money to national security.⁷⁵

Both the foreign aid and national security communities blasted the plan. Cutting the foreign aid budget would mark "U.S. withdrawal from the world, rather than continued leadership and engagement," says Travis Adkins, senior director for public policy and government relations at InterAction, a Washington alliance of nongovernmental organizations. Sen. Lindsey Graham, a Republican from South Carolina and the chair of the Appropriations Subcommittee on State and Foreign Aid, said cutting aid would damage national security. "Now is not the time for retreat," he said. "Now is the time to double down on diplomacy and development."⁷⁶

The Senate Appropriations Committee approved \$51 billion for the State Department, foreign operations and related programs for fiscal 2018 — almost \$11 billion above Trump's request.⁷⁷

While disparaging democracy-building, Trump continues to praise authoritarian leaders. Trump said Egyptian strongman al-Sisi was a "fantastic job," and during a May trip to the Middle East he promised to sell weapons to the repressive Saudi Arabian monarchy and

urged regional leaders to get tougher on Islamist terrorists — without mentioning that the Saudis had been accused of human-rights abuses.⁷⁸

Human-rights activists say extrajudicial killings and other abuses in Egypt spiked after Trump's trip. "The visit has emboldened Arab rulers that whatever violations they commit against their people are going to be accepted by the Trump administration," said Gamal Eid, executive director of the Arab Network for Human Rights Information. In Egypt, he said, Trump's actions gave Sisi "the green light to increase the repression. He's been empowered."⁷⁹

Obama had frozen part of Egypt's annual military aid package for two years after al-Sisi-led troops overthrew Morsi, and Obama never invited al-Sisi to the White House. In mid-August, the Trump administration said it would cut or delay \$290 million in military and economic aid to Egypt after the government passed a law restricting NGOs from engaging in pro-democracy political activity. It was later revealed that the aid was frozen in part because Egyptians were buying contraband weapons from North Korea.⁸⁰

Meanwhile, the congressional and FBI investigations into Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election continue. In September, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg notified Congress that his company had discovered that Russian operatives had paid \$100,000 for 3,000 ads posted on 470 phony Facebook pages during the presidential election. The ads aimed to create social chaos, religious and racial division and suppress the vote, said those who had viewed them. Similar ads were discovered on Twitter, Facebook and Google.⁸¹

The Kremlin's goal is "to encourage discord in American society," said Michael A. McFaul, a former U.S. ambassador to Russia and currently director of the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University. Putin believes "our society is imperfect, that our democracy is not better than his, so to

see us in conflict on big social issues is in the Kremlin's interests."⁸²

Embattled Democracies

As the European Union prepares for uncertainty after the upcoming departure of Great Britain, member states also must decide how to handle rising populism and nationalism.

In September, when Angela Merkel earned a fourth term as German chancellor, Alternative for Germany won parliamentary representation, the first time a far-right party earned seats in parliament in more than 60 years.⁸³

In Poland, where leaders took a cue from nationalist Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, Jarosław Kaczyński, leader of the ruling Law and Justice Party, pushed to appoint loyalists to the constitutional court and public broadcasting station. A law passed in July would allow the government to fire Supreme Court judges, the very people responsible for approving election results. After tens of thousands of protesters demanded that Poland's courts remain free, President Andrzej Duda said he would veto the law.⁸⁴

In Turkey, President Erdogan has tried to silence opposition activists after a military coup failed in 2016. A state of emergency remains, and the government has fired or suspended 130,000 workers and arrested about 45,000, including thousands of lawyers, teachers, doctors, journalists and jurists. Recently, hundreds of officials accused of fomenting the plot were sentenced to life in prison. In the spring, voters narrowly approved constitutional amendments that ended the parliamentary system and granted vast powers to the winner of the 2019 presidential election; observers say Erdogan will likely win that. Erdogan's slide toward autocratic rule led the EU Parliament last November to suspend negotiations over Turkey's 1987 application to join.⁸⁵

In Russia, Putin continues to wield enormous control after 17 years as either

president or prime minister. Freedom House rates Russia as "not free" and ranks political rights there among the lowest anywhere. After Russia invaded Ukraine's Crimean region in 2014, Western nations, including the United States, imposed tough economic sanctions that have hampered Russia's economy.⁸⁶

With revenues down, some wages unpaid and poverty rising, opposition leader Navalny's website, which carries investigative pieces detailing what he says are Putin's cronies' corrupt practices, has found a receptive audience. The government has imposed heavy fines on protests deemed illegal and prosecuted Navalny for embezzlement in a case international officials call a sham.⁸⁷

In Southeast Asia, the Philippines' Duterte continues a war on drug users and dealers begun when he took office in June 2016. At least 7,000 Filipinos are dead, most killed without charges or prosecutions. The extrajudicial killings and threats against journalists led Freedom House to reclassify the onetime established democracy as "partly free." Religious and international human-rights groups have condemned the campaign, but Trump has said Duterte is doing an "unbelievable job on the drug problem."⁸⁸

The backsliding on democracy in the former U.S. colony was especially dramatic because the Philippines was known as the "ultimate Third World democracy," with a modern judiciary, free press and speech, a two-party political system with open elections and separation between the church and state, wrote William H. Overholt, a senior fellow at the Asia Center at Harvard University. Moreover, Duterte's predecessor, Benigno Aquino, had set the country on "an upward path of improved growth, democracy and alliance with the United States," he said.⁸⁹

Elsewhere in Southeast Asia, the Rohingya crisis continues to unfold in Myanmar (formerly Burma), once praised as an example of how a former military junta converted to a democratically elected

Continued on p. 886

Is democracy in retreat around the world?



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during the late 20th century, societies everywhere threw off dictatorship and embraced freedom. It was understood that the world's democracies offered peace and prosperity, while authoritarianism brought poverty and oppression.

Today, democracy seems in retreat. Russia and China add layer on layer of repression; new democracies like Poland and Hungary move sharply toward authoritarianism; conditions continue to erode throughout Southeast Asia and the Middle East. Populist parties with nativist streaks are fixtures in Europe, and a populist-nationalist sits in the White House.

Still, things could turn around in the future. Consider these points:

- Both U.S. and European economies are rebounding, with growth rising and unemployment falling. The major democracies remain the world's wealthiest countries.

- The Venezuelan catastrophe has had major ripple effects in the region and beyond, with South American voters rejecting parties associated with the left-wing ideology of former Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez.

- In Europe, centrist forces have maintained government control, even as populist parties have made gains.

- Vladimir Putin's repressive model remains highly unpopular in the Russian neighborhood and beyond. Russian speakers in the Baltics prefer EU democracies to a kleptocratic, propaganda-driven, petro-state. Likewise, the people of Georgia and Ukraine are clearly hostile to the Putin dictatorship. The loss of influence in Ukraine is a major setback for Putin.

- Likewise, the people of Taiwan and Hong Kong have made clear their revulsion at Beijing's police-state regimentation.

- Enthusiasm for democracy remains high throughout Africa. Spurred by unhappy experiences with venal leaders-for-life, opposition parties and civil society have persisted in their drive for honest elections, anticorruption laws and legal reforms.

- U.S. democratic institutions — the media, courts and civil society — have resisted President Trump's agenda and limited the administration's ability to challenge constitutional norms.

Despite some serious setbacks, democracy remains the system of choice for the majority. Freedom's formerly smug advocates, having experienced reversals, are now resisting — focusing on populists at home and autocrats abroad. Meanwhile, as insecure strongmen desperately seek new methods of censorship and political control, the appeal of the China model, Bolivarian socialism and Putinism are fading. Dictatorship is not the wave of the future.



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rarely have things looked so bad for democracy as they do today. The world's most formidable democracy promoter, the European Union, is in disarray and faces possible disintegration. Far right forces have gained unprecedented support in Europe. Russia and China are resurgent. And most important, the United States itself is now led by a president who openly attacks the foundations of democracy. Democracy is backsliding in three countries where pluralism was once well-established: Venezuela, Hungary and (probably) Poland. The most recent report from Freedom House says the world has witnessed "the 11th straight consecutive year of decline in global freedom."

Overall, however, the case for democratic decline is relatively weak.

According to Freedom House, the number of democracies has remained more or less stable since the start of the millennium — fluctuating between 85 and 90. While several countries that Freedom House ranked as "free" in the late 1990s — including Venezuela — lost that ranking in the 2000s, several other countries became democratic during this same period, including Brazil, Croatia, Serbia and Tunisia.

And although the average Freedom House autocracy score has increased over the last decade — from 3.2 in 2005 to 3.4 in 2016 — the shift has been vanishingly small, and the level of autocracy has decreased very slightly since 2000. In addition, the widely used Polity Data Series index of the level of democracy in countries across the globe indicates that the number of democracies (countries with a score of 7 or above) has increased significantly from 67 in 2000 to 84 in 2016.

Thus, while the last decade has almost universally been seen as a time of democratic deterioration, Freedom House's own data suggests that it may be better understood as a period of democratic resilience. Indeed, while pluralism is no longer on the rise, democracy has survived in a range of countries with highly unfavorable conditions for fostering democracy, such as Benin, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Ghana, Mongolia and Romania. The question of why and how so many new democracies have survived in the face of far less favorable international environments merits further study. A better understanding of this democratic survival would help democracy advocates prepare for the all-too-likely day when authoritarian resurgence does, in fact, arrive.

Continued from p. 884

civilian government, led by Nobel Peace Prize-winner Aung San Suu Kyi.*⁹⁰

In late August, after Rohingya rebels attacked a local police station, Myanmar's military torched Rohingya villages and shot residents, forcing some 500,000 Rohingyans to flee to neighboring Bangladesh. Although the Muslim Rohingyas have lived in predominantly Buddhist Myanmar for centuries, the current government says they are illegal immigrants and has denied them cit-

took the unprecedented step of annulling the results of the Aug. 8 re-election of President Uhuru Kenyatta. The court said the election was "neither transparent or verifiable" and ordered a new election, scheduled for Oct. 26.⁹²

Conservatives also advanced recently. On Oct. 15, right-wing parties in Austria made solid gains in parliamentary elections after promising a hard line on immigration. The conservative People's Party, led by rising political star Sebastian Kurz, 31, won at least 31.7 percent of

Michael Pillsbury, the director of the Center on Chinese Strategy at the Hudson Institute, a conservative think tank in Washington, has argued that if China's economy continues its robust growth — which many economists doubt — and if strict communists maintain control, China could become the dominant world power by mid-century.⁹⁵

But Andrew J. Nathan, a Columbia University political scientist, said many countries would struggle to emulate China. "The Chinese model requires large fiscal resources, technological sophistication, a well-trained and loyal security apparatus, and sufficient political discipline . . . not to take power struggles public," he wrote.⁹⁶



Getty Images/Samsul Mohd Said

Members of Myanmar's Rohingya minority demonstrate in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on Nov. 25, 2016, against persecution of the predominantly Muslim group. In late August, Myanmar's military torched Rohingya villages and shot residents, forcing some 500,000 Rohingyans to flee to neighboring Bangladesh, in what U.N. officials have called a campaign of ethnic cleansing.

izenship, largely because of their Bangladeshi heritage. The situation is a "textbook example of ethnic cleansing," according to the U.N. high commissioner for human rights. Although foreign officials have criticized Suu Kyi for not condemning the army, her advisers say she worries it could antagonize the military and prevent her from building a full democracy.⁹¹

In a bright spot for democracy, opposition parties and civil society groups in Africa have persistently pushed for elections, legal reforms and anticorruption laws. Kenya's Supreme Court on Sept. 1

the vote, and the far-right Freedom Party won 26 percent. The contest echoed some of the current trends in Europe's 2017 elections, including populist leaders stoking fear of Muslim immigration, disillusion with established politicians and the decline of center-left parties.⁹³

Meanwhile, China continues to woo other countries to show that authoritarianism and modernization can co-exist. "For now, China is using the U.S. playbook from the 1970s: 'How to be a superpower — use wads of cash and back dictators,'" said Michael Vatikiotis, the Asia regional director at the Geneva-based Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue. "But it's not clear how long that strategy will last."⁹⁴

OUTLOOK

Dangerous Populist Age

The rise of nationalist movements and virulent autocracies presents a growing problem for democratic principles, human rights and independent judiciaries. Facing these pressures, many global leaders and nations will pursue their own narrow interests, unrestrained and unconcerned with global peace, freedom, prosperity and health, according to Freedom House.⁹⁷

The coming years will be "suspended between a continued instability and erosion of democracy globally and the possibility of a full-blown reverse wave of democratic breakdowns," says Stanford professor Diamond. "The prospects for democratic transitions don't look very good," he adds. "The best one could realistically hope for is a kind of stabilization around this rather difficult moment — so not much further deterioration."

"The sheen has been taken off the Washington model," says political scientist Klaas. Some African leaders, for instance, admire China for its strong economy

* Aung San Suu Kyi is the state counselor, a position akin to a prime minister.

and governing efficiency, he says, citing several countries where leaders have tried to stay in power by changing their constitutions, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Djibouti, Cameroon, Chad, Uganda, Gabon and Togo.⁹⁸

Yascha Mounk, a lecturer on political theory at Harvard, and Roberto Stefan Foa, a political scientist at the University of Melbourne in Australia, developed a stress test to detect how susceptible democracies are to massive failures. Among other categories, they rate public support for continued democracy, whether citizens support nondemocratic forms of government such as military rule and whether “anti-system parties and movements” are gaining strength by insisting that the government is illegitimate. If support for democracy plummets as the other measures rise, the two professors say, a country is “deconsolidating,” a kind of low-grade fever that can lead to a full-blown crisis.⁹⁹ (See graphic, p. 876.)

Their theory has drawn criticisms, however. Ronald Inglehart, a political scientist at the University of Michigan, has questioned whether Mounk and Foa’s methods truly signal democracy’s long-term decline.¹⁰⁰

Along with Stanford University’s Diamond, Mounk and Foa say that if nations intend to stop the slide into authoritarianism, politicians and voters must work to counter anti-democratic forces. “In countries where populists have not yet taken power, radical reforms are needed to counteract the social and economic drivers of democratic deconsolidation,” Mounk and Foa write. “Establishment politicians with a real commitment to liberal democracy may be more likely to undertake these reforms — and to disregard the protestations of interest groups that oppose them — when they are afraid that anti-system parties are about to take power. In that sense, the dangerous age of populism may harbor an opportunity for righting the ship of state after all.”¹⁰¹

In his book *The Despot’s Accomplice*, Klaas offers 10 principles for promoting

democracy and steering foundering democracies and autocracies to freedom. Two involve thinking long-term and not trying to impose democracy through war.¹⁰²

The world’s democracies, he suggested, might also establish a “League of Democracies,” a sort of U.N. for free trade in which members would be required to support democratic norms.¹⁰³

Diamond says the United States can support ailing democracies by supporting a foreign policy that is not necessarily interventionist but “calls out regressions from democratic norms and standards.” ■

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Brookings Institution, 1775 Massachusetts Ave., N.W., Washington, DC 20036; 202-797-6000; www.brookings.edu. A think tank that researches domestic and international issues.

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1779 Massachusetts Ave., N.W., Washington, DC 20036; 202-483-7600; www.ceip.org. An international affairs research organization that reports on the health of democracies and the rule of law.

Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law, Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, Encina Hall, 616 Serra St C100, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305-6055; 650-723-4581; <https://cddrl.fsi.stanford.edu>. A research center that studies how countries can become prosperous and democratic.

Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1800 K St., N.W., Suite 400, Washington, DC 20006; 202-887-0200; www.csis.org. A nonpartisan think tank that evaluates democracy-promotion programs.

Council on Foreign Relations, The Harold Pratt House, 58 East 68th St., New York, NY 10065; 212-434-9400; www.cfr.org. A nonpartisan think tank that studies foreign policy choices facing the U.S. and other countries.

Freedom House, 1850 M St., N.W., 11th floor, Washington, DC 20036; 202-296-5101; <https://freedomhouse.org>. An independent watchdog group that researches and advocates for democracy, political freedom and human rights.

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