



International Democracy Support: Filling the Leadership Vacuum

THOMAS CAROTHERS

At its recent global summit in Ottawa, the Open Government Partnership (OGP), a multilateral initiative comprising seventy-nine national governments, twenty local governments, and thousands of civic organizations, released its first flagship report assessing the state of open government globally, “[Democracy Beyond the Ballot Box](#).” The report analyzes and evaluates both progress and shortcomings in OGP members’ efforts to make governance more transparent and accountable to citizens. Building on this valuable stocktaking report, and reflecting the importance of this topic globally, the Democracy, Conflict, and Governance Program is publishing a series of three articles exploring key issues facing the open government agenda. This is the second article in the series.

The United States has long played a crucial leadership role in supporting democracy globally. Although this leadership has often been flawed, as well as resented and resisted by numerous countries, it has been a significant factor in galvanizing and strengthening the loose community of governments, multilateral organizations,

international nongovernmental organizations, and others working in the domain. Under President Donald Trump’s direction, the United States has backed away from this role in numerous, highly public ways. This has left many democracy practitioners wondering how damaging the shift will be and whether other actors will be able to fill the vacuum.

The decline of U.S. leadership is indeed a hard blow to democracy support efforts, but it does not signal their demise. While no one government has the geopolitical heft or reach to assume the preeminent role that the United States has deserted, other major players on democracy support are stepping forward in at least modest ways across different parts of the democracy agenda, from open governance and anticorruption to media freedom and human rights. Their engagement at least ensures that international democracy support is not disappearing. But meeting the growing global challenges to democracy will require a much more profound renovation.



THE INTERNATIONAL DEMOCRACY COMMUNITY

As democracy spread in developing and post-communist countries in the 1980s and 1990s, a large, diverse set of transnational actors began working to advance democracy's global fortunes. Established Western democracies became the mainstays of this community, employing diplomatic and economic carrots and sticks, as well as rapidly growing democracy assistance programs to push autocrats toward democratic openings and support democratic transitions. An array of international nongovernmental organizations also gradually joined in, including democracy endowments, political party foundations, electoral assistance organizations, media support organizations, and private foundations. Multilateral organizations at the global and regional levels (for example, the United Nations Development Programme and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) also joined the effort. Over time, various Southern democracies, like [Brazil](#), [India](#), and [South Africa](#), began initiatives to nurture democracy beyond their borders.

These various actors have different views on the concept of democracy and how to balance democracy against other interests, as well as different methods of democracy support. Yet they all share at least some commitment to advancing democracy globally and, in this critical way, constitute a community, albeit a loose one. One cannot understand democratic developments in the world over the last thirty years without taking the actions of this community into account.

THE RISE AND FALL OF U.S. LEADERSHIP

In the late Cold War and early post-Cold War years, the United States [took the lead](#) in projecting a vision of global democracy and making it a core foreign policy priority. Successive U.S. administrations devoted significant diplomatic capital to supporting the

spread of democracy, often building coalitions among governments and within multilateral organizations to help mobilize support for democratizing governments or pressure backsliding ones. The U.S. government developed the most extensive set of aid programs dedicated to democracy support and, in doing so, facilitated the establishment of significant U.S. nongovernmental organizations engaged in democracy building, such as the two U.S. political party institutes and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems.

Of course, this leadership was frequently flawed. The United States was often glaringly inconsistent in its pursuit of democratic goals, pushing democracy to the back burner in some places for the sake of countervailing strategic and economic interests. The United States hewed to a relatively narrow vision of democracy, leaving out socioeconomic or social justice concerns that other democracy supporters felt should be included. During the presidency of George W. Bush, tying democracy promotion to [exertions of military muscle](#) repelled other members of the pro-democracy community, most notably in the case of the Iraq War. At the other end of the spectrum, during the presidency of Barack Obama, [growing U.S. caution](#) about taking on transformational activities abroad gave rise to doubts about Washington's continued willingness to stand up for democracy. Yet despite the serious criticisms and doubts, the international democracy community generally viewed the United States as a vital force in helping democracy support gain traction and weight.

To the astonishment and dismay of some key U.S. democratic allies, Trump, through his repeated fawning over autocrats, disdain for traditional allies, and evident lack of interest in democracy's global fortunes, has sharply moved the United States [away from its pivotal role](#) in advancing democracy abroad. At the 2019 G20 summit in Osaka, Japan, [he joked with Russian President Vladimir Putin](#) about eliminating journalists and the problem of fake news. His peacemaking approach to North Korea downplays Kim Jong Un's totalitarian practices. His escalation of hostilities with Iran has

been coupled with a fulsome embrace of autocratic leaders in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt. While the Trump administration has stepped up pressure on Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, its blustery suggestions of possible military action have [unsettled regional democratic allies](#). Moreover, with his strident antidemocratic actions at home, including his attacks on independent media, the separation of powers, and the rule of law, Trump has put a harsh end to the United States' status as a global democratic exemplar.

Below the presidential level, however, some elements of U.S. democracy support continue. U.S. diplomats and the full community of U.S. democracy aid providers continue to support democratic transitions around the world. In Armenia and Ethiopia, for example, they have been finding ways to foster hopeful political openings. In Cambodia, the U.S. embassy tried to push back against the recent harsh political crackdown by the country's autocratic leader. In Tunisia, the United States continues to quietly but purposefully bolster a shaky democratic transition. Yet without top-level support for pro-democracy policies, these mid-level efforts—no matter how well-intended and well-executed—[carry less weight](#), especially where autocrats have sized up the U.S. president and see a friend they can count on.

LEADERSHIP IN PARTS

The U.S. abdication of its leadership role comes at a difficult time for the international democracy community. Grappling with serious democratic pressures of their own, including protests by alienated, angry citizens and the spread of illiberal political forces, most other major Western democratic governments are projecting diminished confidence in the value of democracy as a global norm. Numerous non-Western democracies that, a decade ago, seemed to represent a new source of energy and ambition for international democracy support, such as Brazil, India, South Africa, and Tur-

key, are experiencing democratic drift or backsliding. Authoritarian powers have [stepped up their efforts](#) to undercut some multilateral organizations' initiatives to advance democratic norms and human rights values.

Yet important parts of the international democracy support community remain intact. None of the other Western democracies that played crucial roles in supporting global democracy over the past twenty-five years have elected a leader who has brusquely shifted foreign policy gears, embraced autocrats, and radiated antidemocratic instincts domestically. These countries continue to support many democratic transitions through diplomatic measures and democracy-related assistance. Multilateral organizations that deal with democracy issues are facing more pushback from authoritarians than before but are still active. The numerous international nongovernmental organizations involved in democracy-related programming are uncertain about the security of their long-term funding, but, for the most part, have not experienced significant cuts and remain deeply engaged around the world.

But what of the leadership void? Certainly no one country is seeking to take up the preeminent role that the United States previously played. But some other democratic governments and pro-democratic actors are leaning forward in useful ways on at least some parts of the democracy agenda, such as multilateral support of democracy, open governance, media freedom, anticorruption, and human rights.

For example, to help preserve multilateral engagement on democracy, Sweden—a country that has long punched well above its weight on global democracy issues—announced a new [“drive for democracy”](#) in February. Sweden will increase its multilateral and bilateral diplomatic efforts to advance democracy, from strengthening independent media and civil society to supporting the rule of law, free elections, and accountable governance. It also foresees increased funding for democracy aid programming. This new push builds on Sweden's quiet but active steps in recent years



to bolster international democracy support in the face of headwinds. For instance, in 2018, Sweden [increased its contribution](#) to the United Nations Democracy Fund by a little more than the amount that the Trump administration had decreased the U.S. contribution in the previous year. To support multilateralism more generally, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas has put forward the idea of an “[alliance of multilateralists](#)” and sought the interest of Japan and other middle powers.

Also in the realm of diplomatic engagement on democracy, although the U.S. response to the political crisis in Venezuela dominates U.S. media coverage of that issue, a host of other governments are actively engaged as well. In May 2019, Norway [facilitated negotiations](#) between Maduro’s regime and the democratic opposition. And two multilateral bodies that do not include the United States—the Lima Group, created in 2017 in response to the crisis and now composed of fourteen nations in the Western Hemisphere, and the EU-backed [International Contact Group](#)—have been leading advocates for a peaceful, democratic solution. In Africa, a regional organization, ECOWAS, helped head off an [electoral crisis in the Gambia](#) in 2017 and relieved tensions around an electoral dispute [in Benin](#) earlier this year.

Multiple countries have also stepped up efforts to advance the norm and practice of open governance, a concept that, when defined broadly as increasing accountability, transparency, and participation, connects directly to democracy goals. Meanwhile, the Trump administration has downgraded the importance of the norm, most notably by taking a back seat in organizations such as the Open Government Partnership (OGP). The United States spearheaded the establishment of the OGP in 2011 and played a central role in expanding the organization until 2017. But, in recent years, it has failed to invest significant senior-level diplomatic capital in the partnership. Argentina and Canada are currently the government

co-chairs of the group’s Steering Committee, and Canada, in particular, has played a very supportive role, including by hosting the 2019 OGP Global Summit. Georgia, Germany, and Indonesia will give the organization additional energy when they [join the Steering Committee](#) this October. In 2018, the UK Department for International Development increased its contribution to the OGP [more than fourfold](#).

Media freedom has also risen to the top of the democracy agenda for many countries, given the increasing number and severity of attacks on the press and journalists. While the U.S. president repeatedly denigrates the role of independent media in the United States, the UK is making the issue a new global priority. Together with Canada, the UK recently hosted a [major international conference](#) on the topic. Although the United States has [soft-pedaled its reaction](#) to the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in 2018, other governments have been outspokenly critical. Germany has imposed an [arms embargo on Saudi Arabia](#) in response to the killing.

Another area where the Trump administration—beset with many corruption issues at home—is demonstrating a weak resolve is on international anticorruption efforts. But in this case as well, other actors are productively at work and some are bolstering their engagement. In 2017 and 2018, the UK launched a five-year [Anti-Corruption Strategy](#), a [Prosperity Fund Global Anti-Corruption Programme](#), and a [Serious and Organised Crime Strategy](#) that includes a significant campaign to counter international illicit finance. At the 2019 OGP Global Summit, the UK also led the launch of the new [Beneficial Ownership Leadership Group](#), a coalition of governments that aims to drive a global shift toward mandatory, public registers of beneficial ownership (that help clearly identify the ultimate owners of assets.) Among international organizations, the International Monetary Fund [unveiled a new framework](#) in 2018 for “enhanced” and “systematic”

engagement on corruption issues. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, in turn, is making a valuable contribution through its steady [implementation of the Anti-Bribery Convention](#).

In the domain of human rights, other countries are also stepping up different ways. In early July, twenty-two countries, not including the United States, issued a [joint statement](#) condemning China's mass detention of Uyghurs and other minorities in the country's Xinjiang Province—the first broad international condemnation of that policy. On LGBTI rights, as the Trump administration has backed away from the previously supportive U.S. international stance, Canada has leaned in, helping to fill at least some of the vacuum. As co-chair of the [Equal Rights Coalition](#), a multilateral organization that seeks to advance LGBTI rights and inclusion, Canada hosted a conference on LGBTI issues in August 2018. More recently, it [allocated new funds](#) dedicated to supporting LGBTI rights in developing countries. Canadian diplomats have also shown initiative in [leading the international condemnation](#) of violence against LGBTI persons and [providing safe haven to LGBTI refugees](#).

It is important to note that leadership on democracy support does not only come from governments. In the last ten years, some progress on the democracy agenda can be attributed to complex coalitions of diverse actors. Within these coalitions, transnational and domestic civic groups play dynamic roles, in partnership with supportive governments and multilateral organizations.

One example is the domain of open governance, where a large array of governmental and nongovernmental organizations push for reforms. The OGP is a valuable actor in this space. As a hybrid organization of governments and major international nongovernmental organizations that also work alongside large numbers of local civic groups, it reaches a wide range of policy actors and communities in its efforts to advance open governance. Of course, the place of governments in

the OGP is crucial, but its many civic partners are invaluable pistons in the engine of change.

Nongovernmental organizations are also actively promoting women's political participation internationally. In most regions, the past two decades have witnessed substantial advances in the role of women in politics—as activists, candidates, legislators, and executive branch representatives. There have been serious limitations and setbacks, such as the rising level of [violence against women in politics](#), but the overall trend is an encouraging counterpoint to the larger narrative of the global democratic recession. Some forward-leaning governments have done much to foster this progress, especially the Nordic governments, but leadership in this area has been multifaceted, involving significant efforts by international women's rights groups, domestic civic activists, and multilateral initiatives.

TREADING WATER

The loss of sustained, high-level U.S. government commitment to advancing democracy abroad is a serious blow to the international democracy community and [terrible news for democracy's global outlook](#). But it is not a fatal blow. A wide array of governments, international organizations, and nongovernmental organizations (including many U.S. ones) continue in manifold ways to seek to preserve or advance democracy where it has made gains and encourage democratic breakthroughs where it has not. None of these actors is capable on its own of playing the leadership role that the United States has forfeited. But some of them are banding together in different groupings to exert leadership on selected parts of the democracy agenda. If the United States can restore its previous level of global engagement on democracy and rebuild its status as a political exemplar, it will find many partners ready to join it in renewing international support for democracy. Expectations should be realistic, however.

The road back will be difficult and profound. Old paradigms and habits no longer fit the harsh challenges facing democracy worldwide—from the [increased assertiveness](#) and adaptive learning of autocratic powers to the numerous ways [technological change](#) is giving governments new tools to repress and manipulate their citizens. International democracy support is surviving the current choppy seas. But simply treading water will not be enough to get through the storm.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thomas Carothers is the senior vice president for studies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

NOTES

For your convenience, this document contains hyperlinked source notes as indicated by teal-colored text.



© 2019 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. All rights reserved.

Carnegie does not take institutional positions on public policy issues; the views represented herein are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of Carnegie, its staff, or its trustees.