

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

All Democracy Is Global

Why America Can't Shrink from the Fight for Freedom

By Larry Diamond

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Matt Chase

The world is mired in a deep, diffuse, and protracted democratic recession. According to Freedom House, 2021 was the 16th consecutive year in which more countries declined in freedom than gained. Tunisia, the sole democracy to emerge from the Arab Spring protests that began in 2010, is morphing into a dictatorship. In countries as diverse as Bangladesh, Hungary, and Turkey, elections have long ceased to be democratic. Autocrats in Algeria, Belarus, Ethiopia, Sudan, Turkey, and Zimbabwe have clung to power despite mounting public demands for democratization. In Africa, seven democracies have slid back into autocracy since 2015, including Benin and Burkina Faso.

Democracy is looking shaky even in countries that hold free and fair elections. In emerging-market behemoths such as Brazil, India, and Mexico, democratic institutions and norms are under attack. Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro has made threats of an *autogolpe* (self-coup) and a possible return to military rule if he does not win

reelection in October. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has steadily chipped away at press freedoms, minority rights, judicial independence, the integrity of the civil service, and the autonomy of civil society. Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has attempted to silence critics and remove democratic checks and balances.

Democratic prospects have risen and fallen in decades past, but they now confront a formidable new problem: democracy is at risk in the very country that has traditionally been its most ardent champion. Over the past dozen years, the United States has experienced one of the biggest declines in political rights and civil liberties of any country measured by the Freedom House annual survey. *The Economist* now ranks the United States as a “flawed democracy” behind Spain, Costa Rica, and Chile. U.S. President Donald Trump deserves much of the blame: he abused presidential power on a scale unprecedented in U.S. history and, after being voted out of office, propagated the “Big Lie” of election fraud and incited the violent rioters who stormed the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. But American democracy was in peril before Trump assumed office, with rising polarization exposing acute flaws in American democratic institutions. The Electoral College, the representational structure of the Senate, the Senate filibuster, the brazen gerrymandering of House districts, and lifetime appointments to the Supreme Court have all made it possible for a political minority to exert prolonged outside influence.

Can a country in the throes of its own democratic decay do anything to arrest the broader global decline? For many, the answer is no. The United States needs to get its own house in order before it lectures others, members of this camp say. Lacking the moral standing to promote freedom abroad, Washington should focus on its own troubles, leaving other countries to deal with theirs. Besides, critics argue, anyone who still thinks the United States can competently promote democracy abroad must have forgotten the disaster that was the Iraq war.

But giving up the fight for freedom would be a tragic mistake. U.S. democracy has always been a work in progress, and the courageous political leaders, activists, journalists, and human rights defenders seeking to achieve or preserve democracy in their countries can't wait for the United States to fix its own internal problems before it provides help. Most people around the world want political freedom, and they worry about its absence or fragility. Now more than ever, the world needs the United States to support democracy—and the United States needs a more muscular and imaginative approach to spreading it.

This is not to deny the urgent importance of defending and strengthening core features of democracy in the United States. This includes securing future elections against attempts to subvert or overturn them, ensuring that everyone eligible to vote has a fair opportunity to do so, sustaining the tradition of nonpartisan electoral administration, and protecting election officials and officeholders from threats of (not to mention acts of) violence, in part by punishing the perpetrators. Failing to do these things, and failing to strive for deeper reforms to diminish polarization and improve democratic functioning, will weaken the United States' leverage in the global struggle for democracy and render other countries more vulnerable to authoritarian propaganda.

American foreign policy is not always pro-democratic, however. Policymakers are continually considering what constitutes the United States' international interests, and in some cases they prioritize good relations with autocratic actors. That said, strong U.S. leadership is necessary—though not sufficient—for the health of global democracy.

Finally, it is not safe to assume that all Americans appreciate the importance of promoting democracy abroad. The case for doing so must be made to each new generation. Whatever happens to the economic aspects of globalization, the world will continue to shrink: people, information, ideas, innovations, and diverse forms of influence cross borders constantly. What was true during the twentieth century is even truer today: every political system is affected by every other, and powerful, aggressive autocracies pose an existential and expansive threat to the world's democracies. For evidence, look no further than Russia's war on Ukraine and China's pressure on Taiwan.

A world in which democracy and the rule of law predominate will be friendlier to American interests and democratic values. And it will be a much more peaceful and economically secure world. Who is stealing American high technology and scientific breakthroughs? The greatest threat by far is from the world's most powerful autocracy, China. It is not the democracies of Asia, Europe, or anywhere else that threaten the security of U.S. supply chains for strategic minerals, semiconductors, and so on. And it is not democratic allies that pose a military threat to the United States, but rather belligerent nuclear armed autocracies such as China, North Korea, Russia, and perhaps, soon, Iran. Morality aside, democracies are far more likely to ensure global peace, property rights, security, and shared prosperity.

SHIFTS IN THE ZEITGEIST

It is fair to ask whether the global struggle between two political systems, democracy and autocracy, is the best way to frame the U.S. national interest. Critics question whether the United States should begin a "new cold war," arguing that the current, multipolar world does not fit the old paradigm. And fewer countries are strongly aligned with any great power; U.S. policymakers need to be wary of forcing countries to choose between China and Russia on one hand and United States and Europe on the other. But the United States needs to defend the principles of freedom and territorial integrity, or the coming years will seem a lot more like the 1930s than the 1990s. The hard truth is that the world's two major autocracies—China and Russia—are waging sophisticated and well-resourced global campaigns to discredit and subvert democracy. And in this new century, the United States and its allies have been ill prepared to fight back. Esteem for American democracy has waned over the past two decades: the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, failed efforts at state building abroad, successive financial crises, and the rising pressures of internal populism and extremism have all hurt the United States' international image. Major European democracies have also been viewed as sluggish and weak in contrast to China, with its rapid modernization, and Russia, with its resurgence as a power on the international stage.

The result has been a major shift in the Zeitgeist. A narrative has been taking hold that democracies are corrupt and worn out, that they lack energy, capacity, and self-

confidence. The future, the argument goes, therefore lies with stronger, more efficient authoritarian regimes—China, above all. To be sure, some global public opinion surveys have detected a backlash against China’s neocolonial quest for natural resources, strategic assets, market dominance, and corrupt political influence. But in the developing world, many people now look to Beijing for partnership and inspiration.

The deference accorded to authoritarian powers can be discerned in the reaction to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Only a slim majority of Africa’s 54 states backed the March 2022 UN General Assembly resolution condemning this act of aggression. The next month, in a vote on suspending Russia from the UN Human Rights Council, 58 countries abstained, including prominent democracies and “semi-democracies” such as Brazil, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Mexico, Nigeria, Senegal, and South Africa. Ninety-three yes votes were enough to expel Russia from the council, but they were a minority of the UN’s 193 members.

The lack of African support for censuring Russian President Vladimir Putin is a sign of the ties his regime has forged with the continent. In exchange for lucrative mining rights and economic access, Russia has provided roughly a dozen African autocrats with formal military assistance and mercenary fighters and has carried out social media disinformation campaigns to help them maintain their rule. Several African countries are also heavily dependent on Russian exports of fertilizer and wheat. Even Africa’s most influential elected leader, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, blamed NATO expansion for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Russian influence extends beyond Africa. The majority of intellectuals and leaders in the rest of the developing world refuse to sign up for anything that smacks of a new cold war against Russia or China. Many Latin Americans view Western sanctions as selective and politicized—“a tool of the U.S. hegemony,” according to Guillaume Long, a former Ecuadorian foreign minister. Resentments against European colonialism and “Yankee imperialism” lurk beneath the surface, ready to be stirred by Russian and Chinese propaganda and resurgent leftist movements.

STARTING OVER

After a decade and a half of losing ground, democracy promotion needs to be reset. The guiding principle for the right strategy is simple: power matters. This is not to endorse using force to impose democracy. That approach almost always fails, and it discredits peaceful efforts. But as the political scientist Samuel Huntington noted, military and diplomatic power create the geopolitical context in which democracy thrives or founders. Preserving U.S. military strength—and the vigor and deterrent capabilities of U.S. alliances and partnerships—is vital to keeping democracies secure against authoritarian encroachment and intimidation. The United States must develop and deploy conventional and new-generation military assets, including a larger navy. This is necessary to deter authoritarian rivals, most of all, China.

In addition, policymakers must hone U.S. economic strength and technological leadership. Ensuring that the U.S. economy remains the world’s most powerful—and

that the dollar remains the dominant international currency—is vital. Along with its allies, the United States must continue to lead in such technological frontiers as advanced computing, artificial intelligence, bioengineering, robotics, and semiconductors. Staying ahead in these sectors is crucial to ensuring continued U.S. military superiority and overall global leadership. It also sends a message about the comparative advantage of democratic regimes. People and states like to go with a winner. The United States must demonstrate anew that the combination of democracy and private enterprise is a winning formula.

Maintaining a technological edge will require increased funding from the federal government. Financial resources should be earmarked for research and development, a national industrial strategy to steer and stimulate investment in critical U.S. technology industries, and the onshoring of at least some semiconductor and other high-tech manufacturing.



A newspaper stand in Beijing, August 2022
Tingshu Wang / Reuters

To realize these goals, Congress in late July finally passed the CHIPS Act, which provides more than \$52 billion in funding to revive semiconductor manufacturing in the United States, plus tens of billions more in increased support for scientific research and development and for tax credits to further encourage U.S. investment in chip manufacturing. Ideally, in the future Congress will also pass a crucial provision from the original version of the House bill, the America Competes Act, that would lift green card caps for international students graduating from doctoral and many master's degree programs in science, technology, engineering, and math. U.S. universities draw tremendous talent from around the world, and the United States urgently needs skilled scientists and engineers to help win the race for technological dominance. The United States also needs a supercharged international public engagement campaign to win over hearts and minds through innovative multilingual media operations. China and Russia have been gaining ground in the battle over ideas and values because they

are investing more in it than the United States is. They are, furthermore, unconstrained by any fidelity to the truth. Unlike the often boring truth, lurid disinformation quickly goes viral, and that gives the states that traffic in it an advantage.

But there are two deeper problems that U.S. policymakers can and should address. First, the media landscape in countries around the world has been increasingly distorted by overt censorship and covert efforts to intimidate, control, and corrupt professional journalists. Hence, the United States is losing its most critical allies in the battle for open societies: free and independent media in battleground countries. Second, the United States has no clear strategy to disseminate the values of democracy. Creating one will require a long-term effort, conducted with civic partners and indigenous voices on every continent.

States like to side with winners.

Empowering and sustaining independent media is a critical priority. In partnership with other donors, Luminate, a global philanthropy established by the Omidyar Group, has launched the International Fund for Public Interest Media to fill the gap in financing for independent media around the world. It seeks initially to mobilize \$1 billion in annual financing to grow—and in many cases save—-independent media. There is no higher priority for democracy assistance than supporting credible and independent newspapers, magazines, radio and TV stations, and new digital platforms that report the truth. Without them, the United States cannot rein in disinformation or help local movements resist and ultimately retire dictators.

In addition to fostering a healthy international media ecosystem, the U.S. government also needs to buttress its public diplomacy. Closing the U.S. Information Agency in 1999 was one of the biggest mistakes in American global engagement since the end of the Cold War. As James Clapper, the former U.S. director of national intelligence, stated during testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee in 2017, Washington needs a “USIA on steroids” that would “fight this information war a lot more aggressively.” When the USIA was shuttered, it was merged into a section of the State Department led by the undersecretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs. Since then, 17 people have held that title, serving in the job for a little more than a year on average. Since December 2016, seven of the eight incumbents have been in acting rather than permanent roles.

There is no excuse for such apathy from presidential administrations of both parties. The United States needs a general in this global information campaign with the vision, stature, and authority to think boldly. This person must work to craft compelling narratives that tell the United States’ story, rebut false propaganda, foster democratic ideas, and illuminate democratic traditions, struggles, and voices within diverse cultures. These messages should be disseminated creatively, via new media and old. This may require technological leaps to scale the firewalls of state censorship and give people access to new ideas and objective information. Or it could be as simple as producing multimedia libraries of democratic ideas, models, experiences, and institutional forms, translating them into diverse languages, and loading them on thumb drives that could easily be mistaken for pens or lipstick. Civil and human rights groups

on the ground and in exile could then find ways to circulate them, even inside dictatorships.

IT STARTS AT HOME

To be sure, the United States' ability to promote democratic values and practices abroad will be difficult if U.S. citizens do not revive their commitment to them at home. If American democracy sinks ever deeper into polarization, stalemate, subversion, and violence, the U.S. message will appear hypocritical, and U.S. allies will be demoralized. Democrats and Republicans cannot agree about how their own country should be governed, but they both favor peaceful efforts to promote democracy abroad, and they both recognize that the world's most powerful autocracies—particularly China and Russia—pose a grave danger to U.S. national security and the American way of life. What Washington needs is a return to the essential democratic norms of mutual tolerance and restraint in the exercise of power, coupled with an unequivocal commitment by all Republicans to accept future election outcomes.

U.S. policy must also expose and rebuff authoritarian efforts, particularly by China and Russia, to subvert open societies. This malign influence falls between the hard power of military and economic might and the soft power of engagement and persuasion. These states' covert tactics include pushing their propaganda as legitimate news, buying up local media companies, bribing politicians, intimidating businesses, forging partnerships with hidden agendas and secret conditions, threatening their own citizens abroad, and influencing what universities teach and think tanks publish. These forms of subversion seek not only to degrade resistance to Chinese and Russian global ambitions but also to erode democratic norms.

The U.S. government needs to buttress its public diplomacy.

To fight disinformation and authoritarian propaganda, democracy education is crucial. Schools should teach the principles of human rights, free and fair elections, the rule of law, accountability, transparency, and good governance and do so as much as possible through the lens of each country's history and culture. Students should learn the history of these ideas, their roots in diverse cultural and religious traditions, and their universal relevance. Through innovative techniques of instruction and engagement, young people should be equipped and inspired to participate in civic life. Authoritarian and illiberal governments will resist these educational endeavors. In some countries, democracy education may need to proceed entirely outside state-controlled classrooms.

Finally, U.S. policymakers should approach countries with empathy. It is imperative to strive to understand the ideologies, emotions, anxieties, and ambitions that motivate other states. Autocrats will never welcome Western demands that they, in essence, give up power. But wanton abusers of human rights must see that there is a price to pay for crushing dissent. Through resilient diplomacy and an artful application of carrots and sticks, U.S. policymakers should seek to persuade authoritarian rulers that if they ease repression and accept greater political pluralism, their countries will benefit

economically. Then the United States will be better able to help them preserve their sovereignty and national security, and leaders will be more effective at governing.

WHAT'S IN IT FOR THEM?

A major reason China has won adherents abroad is that the country has offered lending, investment, and technological assistance through its Belt and Road Initiative. Of course, the roads, bridges, ports, and telecommunications networks across Africa, Asia, and Latin America come with strings attached. To participate in the Belt and Road Initiative, recipient countries must contract with Chinese construction firms and borrow money from China at commercial rates. This arrangement can land states in the kind of debt crisis that recently cost Sri Lanka its economic and political stability. Inflation in Sri Lanka is set to peak at 70 percent, and President Gotabaya Rajapaksa fled the country in July after nationwide protests.

The United States has long warned countries against entering into financial agreements with China but has offered little in the way of alternatives. Fortunately, that may be changing: U.S. President Joe Biden and the leaders of the other G-7 countries announced in 2022 that they would work with the private sector to invest \$600 billion over the next five years in infrastructure projects in low- and middle-income countries. The U.S. government has pledged \$200 billion to this effort, under the rubric of the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment. Now the G-7 must follow through with these commitments.

The United States must also reform development assistance. Congress should reduce its earmarking of U.S. aid so that more of it can respond to the needs and priorities that recipient countries identify. This is, after all, in the spirit of the U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation, which gives development aid in the form of grants to poor countries that adopt economic and political reforms and then facilitates society-wide consultations to select specific development projects to fund. Such development partnerships will make aid more effective and will make foreign leaders more receptive to an important warning: societies incur enormous risks to their privacy, freedom, and national sovereignty when Chinese companies such as Huawei build their telecommunications infrastructure or provide their police and state security with digital surveillance and facial recognition systems.

These initiatives can guide and sustain a grand strategy for democracy over the medium to the long run. But in the short run, democracy faces specific threats and challenges, the outcomes of which will greatly influence the future of world order.

WIN THE WARS

There is no more important priority than ensuring that Russia's brutal war against Ukraine's democracy ends in Moscow's defeat. In the four months following Russia's February 24 invasion, the United States committed \$5.6 billion in military aid to Ukraine, including heavy artillery, drones, missiles, and aircraft. But U.S. delivery of that military aid has often been slow, and some of Ukraine's requests for advanced

weapons have not been met. Meanwhile, Russia has continued its withering assault. Led by the United States, the NATO alliance must provide Ukraine with the arms, ammunition, and intelligence it needs to successfully counter Russian aggression.

Victory is not just imperative to protect the Ukrainians' right to self-governance. How the war ends will prompt other countries to draw conclusions about which way global politics is heading and which type of political system has the greater will and tenacity. If Ukraine emerges from this conflict substantially free and secure, with its prewar territory intact and with aid and investment flowing in to rebuild, several powerful lessons will become clear. Bystanders will realize that democracy is not a weak system but provides the legitimacy, solidarity, and steadfastness necessary for victory, just as it did for the United Kingdom in World War II. The world will also see that the United States, its European allies, and their democratic partners will sacrifice to help an embattled democracy defend itself and to reaffirm the most vital principle of the international order, that territorial aggression will not stand. Finally, it will demonstrate the disastrous incompetence and miscalculation of Putin's authoritarian state and thus illustrate a larger lesson: when leaders are not constrained by checks and balances and alternative flows of information, they are prone to ruinous blunders.



A polling station in Uttar Pradesh, India, February 2022

[Adnan Abidi / Reuters](#)

There is another reason why failure is not an option in Ukraine, and it is the next and possibly imminent existential priority: Taiwan. China appears increasingly determined to “reunify” Taiwan with the mainland for symbolic, political, economic, and strategic reasons. Symbolically, the Chinese Communist Party’s rulers claim that annexing Taiwan would end a long humiliation and restore China’s rightful status as the dominant power in Asia. Politically, the Chinese leadership’s absorption of Taiwan would extinguish the living proof that a Chinese society can govern itself as a liberal democracy. Economically, Taiwan hosts the world’s most advanced semiconductor manufacturing facilities, producing roughly 90 percent of the world’s most powerful chips. And strategically, taking Taiwan would enable China to break past the first island

chain—the first chain of archipelagoes out from the East Asian continental mainland—and assert control over not only the South China Sea and its passageways to the Indian Ocean but also the entire western Pacific. China could then push the United States out of Asia and become the hegemon of the Indo-Pacific.

This prospect horrifies the countries of the region, beginning with Washington's vital democratic partner in East Asia, Japan. But if conquest looks inevitable or if Taiwan eventually falls, most regional states will opt to ride the wave of China's hegemonic ascent rather than be drowned by it. For this reason, preserving Taiwan's autonomy as a thriving democracy is an overriding strategic priority not just for the region but for the entire world. If Taiwan can maintain its current course of moderation, avoiding any hint of movement toward *de jure* independence, and if China can be deterred from attacking Taiwan, crucial time will be purchased for China to change politically. With a rapidly shrinking and aging population and huge contradictions in its excessively state-dominated economy, China will increasingly face deep domestic challenges that may press it in the direction of pragmatism, reform, and a more enlightened vision of what constitutes national greatness.

To secure a democratic Taiwan, the United States and its strategic partners—including Australia, Japan, and allies in Europe—must avoid pointless provocation. This means adhering to the diplomatic status quo, including the “one China” policy, and avoiding the temptation to take steps such as announcing formal diplomatic recognition of Taiwan, which would be symbolically gratifying but would back China's leaders into a corner. It will also be important for Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen's successor to continue her stance of pragmatism and restraint in cross-strait relations.

Preserving U.S. military strength is vital to keeping democracies secure.

At the same time, both the United States and Taiwan must address the deteriorating military balance with Beijing. China is modernizing militarily, acquiring the ships and weapons systems it would need to mount a cross-strait invasion of Taiwan. It is stepping up disinformation in Taiwan, with a continuous barrage of “news” and social media messages smearing Taiwan's democracy, trying to tilt its politics toward Beijing-friendly politicians, and portraying other democracies as weak and incompetent. Beijing is also escalating military intimidation, including repeated incursions into Taiwan's air defense identification zone. With support from Japan, the United States, and Europe, Taiwan needs to reshuffle this strategic picture. That means more emphasis on asymmetric warfare and larger military reserves. Above all, it means spending more on defense, which, at roughly 2.1 percent of GDP, is still a fraction of the 5.2 percent Taiwan spent in 1990.

Finally, Taiwan could change the dynamic of the political impasse with a dramatic gesture. Taking a page from the National Unification Guidelines adopted by Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui in 1991, Taiwan could establish that as a condition for negotiations on the future shape of its sovereignty, mainland China would have to be a democracy and guarantee fundamental human rights to its citizens. This would signal to the people of mainland China that the real obstacle to dialogue is China's authoritarian Communist Party, which does not respect the rule of law or political accountability and,

therefore, as it showed in Hong Kong, cannot credibly commit to “one country, two systems.” A U.S. information campaign could then puncture Beijing’s social media firewall to amplify this message to the Chinese people.

DON'T FEED THE AUTHORITARIANS

In addition to helping those populations living in the shadow of authoritarian great powers, U.S. policymakers must pay attention to strategically important countries where democracy is struggling. The United States should prioritize Brazil, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria, and—most of all—India, given the size of their populations, their economic potential, and their geopolitical heft. In all these countries, the United States should find innovative ways to support democratic principles, voices, and organizations that do not feed the illiberal nationalist discourses of authoritarian populists.

India poses the hardest challenge. For one thing, the Modi government has made it very difficult for its nongovernmental organizations to receive foreign funding. For another, India is part of the Quad (the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), a strategic partnership that also includes Australia, Japan, and the United States and provides a crucial counterweight to China’s hegemonic ambitions in the region. Thus, U.S. diplomats are wary of ruffling Modi’s feathers. As it balances the tension between calling out Modi’s authoritarian transgressions and maintaining his support on U.S. Indo-Pacific policy, the United States must signal that this new era of strategic cooperation is a long-run bet. But at the same time, the United States must make clear how much more would be possible in trade, investment, and technological cooperation if the current illiberal assaults on critics, opponents, and religious minorities in India were to abate.

The United States also needs to be more agile in response to threats and opportunities—even in countries with less geopolitical weight. Since July 2021, when Tunisian President Kais Saied suspended parliament and seized emergency powers, his actions have increasingly constituted an executive coup against democracy. To make clear the price that will be paid for a failure to restore democracy, the wealthy established democracies should block the International Monetary Fund bailout that Saied needs to manage the country’s economic crisis. More generally, the U.S. government needs to be ready to move quickly, with its democratic allies and with democratic forces in these countries, to label coups for what they are and to preempt and reverse rollbacks of democracy before they congeal into new autocracies. And the United States needs to respond nimbly with incentives and aid when authoritarian divisions and mass demonstrations open new possibilities for democratic transitions.

THE TWILIGHT STRUGGLE

Global conditions for democracy are bad and getting worse. The United States needs to politically and financially support the people and organizations struggling, often at great risk, for freedom. This is a moral imperative. And it is in the United States’ national interest to encourage transitions to more democratic, lawful, and accountable governments around the world. Policymakers can’t predict when pivotal opportunities will emerge to champion democratic campaigns or when a backsliding democratic

government might confront a crisis that would enable democrats to regain the momentum. Moreover, democrats around the world draw hope, institutional lessons, and tactical insights from interactions with one another. Support for them also reaffirms that political freedom and civil liberties are universal rights to which all people are entitled, irrespective of region and culture.

In his inaugural address, U.S. President John F. Kennedy called on Americans to carry on “a long twilight struggle” against tyranny. When he spoke those words in 1961, democracy was far worse off than it is now. Most countries were autocracies, nearly half of Europe was under Soviet domination, and it was not clear whether free or communist societies would win the Cold War. Today, despite a decade and a half of democratic erosion and recession, the picture is much brighter. About half of all countries are democracies, and even where authoritarian regimes predominate, opinion polls show broad popular support for democracy and the rule of law. Hence, most governments that are not democratic believe their legitimacy depends on claiming that they are.

The gap between their claims and reality renders them vulnerable. Even if they are dissatisfied with democratic politicians and institutions, most people would still rather live in a democracy that offers protection for their rights. They want a democracy that is real and that works. The autocracies of the world—China, Egypt, Iran, and Russia, not to mention Venezuela and Zimbabwe and their unfolding calamities—face severe challenges precisely because of their lack of accountability and open debate. All this suggests that the *Zeitgeist* can shift back in favor of democracy. But it won't do so on its own. It requires American power, and a renewal of America's democratic purpose at home and abroad.

LARRY DIAMOND is a Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution and Mosbacher Senior Fellow in Global Democracy at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University.