



BACKGROUND

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A New Democracy Agenda: A Core Progressive Value

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Is democracy promotion going to be a casualty of the Iraq War? The progressive answer should be a resounding no.

Since Woodrow Wilson, progressives have supported democracy abroad for moral and strategic reasons: democracies are far more likely to support human rights and development than oppressive governments, and they build stability in a dangerous world. Conversely, dictatorships and violent radicals feed off one another: the dictator needs the radical threat to justify cracking down on dissent, radicals need the oppression of the dictator to draw support. That vicious spiral spawns global insecurity. Liberal democracy, imperfect as it is, is the only system that empowers the center of the political spectrum in every country, while disempowering violent radicals.

Progressives need to reclaim our support for a form of government that converges our values with our security interests. But to do so, we need a new approach.

Dark Days for Democracy?

The 1990s were heady days for democracy advocates, with democratic progress from East Asia to Eastern Europe, from Russia to Latin America. The peaceful "color revolutions" in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan seemed to extend this trend. But in several important respects the democratic tide is receding. Progressive support for democracy abroad must confront today's challenges head-on:

Iraq: After failing to find weapons of mass destruction or a link to al Qaeda, President Bush has clung to democracy as a rationale for his Iraq policy. Yet the tyranny of chaos that reigns in Iraq hardly stands as the beacon of a "young democracy." To many around the world, democracy is seen as a harbinger of chaos, not stability; an extension of U.S. military power, not American values; a sign of U.S. imperialism, not inter-

national legitimacy. America is so distrusted in the Middle East that would-be liberalizers must distance themselves from us to remain relevant.

Hypocrisy: No country can be completely consistent in its foreign policy, but in promoting democracy America confronts charges of hypocrisy. Why does America demand democratization in some countries, but soft-pedal autocratic allies like Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan? Why does America demand elections in the Palestinian territories, but refuse to deal with Hamas when they win elections? How can America claim moral legitimacy to lead the "free world" when it violates international law through torture, illegal renditions, and holding enemy combatants indefinitely? Democracy advocates can, and should, demand greater consistency in America's approach.

Pushback Abroad: In China, the Communist Party seeks to demonstrate that capitalism can exist without democracy, while financing dictators elsewhere who do the same. In Venezuela, Hugo Chavez consolidates his rule while using oil wealth to gain influence abroad. In Russia, Vladimir Putin centralizes power while attempting to quash democracy in former Soviet republics. Condemning democracy as imperialism, these autocrats shut down the NGOs, opposition parties and independent media needed for reform. Because America is so distrusted, these moves even draw popular support. We must make the case -proven empirically-that democracy, human rights, and development are linked.

Pushback At Home: Some Americans worry that supporting democracy abroad is not our business or beyond our capacity. Some lawmakers on both sides of the aisle have questioned the premise that promoting democracy fosters stability abroad and long term security for America. Many conservatives have fallen back to a pre-9/11 focus on stability, while to some progressives, President Bush's soaring rhetoric about democracy and human liberty sounds hollow, naïve and cynical.



A New Democracy Agenda

"The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world. America's vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one." These words - spoken by President Bush - should be welcomed. Yet the President's "freedom agenda" has failed to advance freedom. Instead of democracy at the barrel of a gun, progressives must advance a new democracy agenda that empowers reformers to be their own agents of change.

Be International: We must defeat the notion that democracy-promotion is merely an American project. The trans-Atlantic Helsinki Accord effort was one of the strongest levers we provided internal reformers in the former Soviet Union. The European Union insists on democracy, human rights, and the rule of law in all of its bilateral agreements and new aid provision. When possible, we should work with other allies, international organizations like the OSCE, and local as well as transnational nonprofit organizations. Democracy is not just our mission - we must be clear that it is an international effort.

Be Bold: Democracy does not happen overnight. But when a revolution catches and the autocrat's statue falls, Americans sometimes think their work is done. Conversely, that is when the hardest work is needed - and America's ability to help local reformers is greatest. When a democratic breakthrough occurs, Congress should promptly pass a major foreign aid and investment package to show the people of the newly democratic country that democracy delivers, and to signal to the new democrats that America stands by them. A bill to establish a seed fund for new democracies that we could draw upon to provide rapid aid would be a significant step toward helping local democrats when they need our support.

Be Patient: It took forty years to help bring peaceful democratic transformation to the Soviet bloc. While American policy needs to push countries to show real progress on democracy, Congress should not expect American democracy promotion programs to bring about democracy over night, nor threaten to cut funding for critical democracy promotion programs whose impact can be immense over time, but not easily measured in the short-term.

Be Comprehensive: Democracy is about more than elections. We cannot repeat the Bush Administration's purple finger fallacy - equating one election in Iraq with the achievement of democratic governance. America must provide steady support for all of the building blocks of democratic society: peaceful transfers of power, the rule of law, a free media, competent security forces, religious freedom, strong legislatures and judiciaries to create a balance of power, human rights, and

civil society. And we must help our democratic allies in delivering basic services, so citizens do not become disillusioned at having elections, but no electricity.

Be Strategic: On the ground, agencies from the Treasury Department to the Department of Justice support different elements of democracy promotion, from supporting the rule of law and human rights, to training parliamentarians-giving us not one policy, but dozens. Through legislation and oversight, Congress should help foster better coordination between these different arms of the U.S. government for greater impact in our democracy promotion policies

Be Consistent: U.S. allies who deprive their citizens of basic human rights must not get a free pass. While we must sometimes prioritize immediate security, and cannot expect democratic transformation overnight, building democracy for long-term global stability must remain a priority on the diplomatic agenda. We must push for progress in providing room for the peaceful open political dissent that eventually leads to the creation of democratic institutions, and greater political freedom. The renewal of aid packages to countries like Pakistan should include benchmarks for reform. Dissidents and reformers within these countries must have our vocal support.

Be Open to Islam: Instead of making enemies out of all Islamic parties and movements - like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt - we should engage those who are willing to move into a pragmatic mainstream for political change, and isolate hard-core radicals who choose violence. From Egypt to Indonesia, we need to build - not burn - bridges with devout Muslims who seek democracy, and recognize their legitimacy.

Be True to Our Values: For America to reclaim its leadership, we must hold ourselves to the same standard that we demand of others: that means an end to torture, an end to illegal renditions, and an end to indefinite detentions. Maintaining the health of our own democracy is essential for our credibility in promoting democracy abroad. America has always been a beacon to the world not because of our power, but because of the power of our example.

It is time for progressives to stand up for a new, competent, and sustainable democracy agenda. Liberty, human dignity, the right to participate in the public sphere, and the right to choose one's government are universal progressive values. We must fight for them abroad just as surely as we stand for them at home.

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