

# Democracy, Rights, and Governance

## Recommendations for the Biden-Harris Administration

### Prioritize and Protect Democracy

Democracy has long been a pillar of U.S. foreign policy—but the future of democracy around the world is at risk. For the first time in nearly two decades, most countries—92 according to the [Varieties of Democracy 2020 Report](#)—are characterized as autocracies. The COVID-19 crisis has created new opportunities for would-be authoritarians to further cement their hold on government structures and erode the protection of human rights. Good democratic governance promotes the stability, resilience, and inclusivity necessary to effectively address COVID-19. It cultivates independent media to communicate lifesaving health information to communities hard-hit by COVID-19; safely adapts electoral processes to the coronavirus context; and ensures civil society can protect fundamental rights and engage in pandemic relief. Commitments to values like transparency and government accountability are also critical to preventing the next pandemic, mitigating and adapting to climate change, and fostering inclusive economic recovery following global shocks.

**American leadership on DRG is more critical than ever.** Democracy, rights, and governance (DRG) work has strong, bipartisan support from Congress. The following recommendations offer actionable steps for the Biden-Harris Administration to begin restore American global leadership on democracy and address long-standing challenges.

### Recommendations

Take early steps that show support for democracy and human rights.

In the first 100 days, the Biden-Harris Administration can set a forward-looking approach and correct recent harmful actions:

- **Deliver a major policy speech elevating the Administration’s priority on democracy and human rights at home and abroad.** An early speech or similar policy pronouncement from President Biden would signal the central role of democracy alongside traditional tools of diplomacy, development, and defense.
- **Pair the policy pronouncement with structure by appointing a Senior Director for Democracy and Human Rights,** or other Special Assistant to the President position, to the National Security Council staff.
- **Make disability rights a priority by issuing an Executive Order to establish a permanent Office of International Disability Rights** at the U.S. Department of State led by an ambassador-at-large for disability rights.
- **Immediately rescind the previous Administration’s Executive Order (E.O.) on Combatting Race and Sex Stereotyping.** If fully enacted, this E.O. has a potential chilling effect on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other partners of the U.S. government who are central to anti-discrimination programs abroad. It also has the potential to hinder progress on racial justice.
- **Review and replace the Unalienable Rights Commission’s final report, which promoted a narrow and discriminatory view of U.S. support for human rights.** We recommend that this be replaced with a reaffirmation of a broader and more aspirational set of human rights protections and explicitly counter the diminution of certain rights for women, LGBTQIA+ persons, and minorities.



- **Review the June 2020 Executive Order on Advancing International Religious Freedom** and consider how it may be detrimental to other marginalized communities' rights and freedoms. One concern is how religious freedom is used to justify discrimination against women, LGBTQIA+ persons, and minorities.

### Expand the role of democratic governance in COVID-19 response.

Good governance will be crucial in disseminating correct information, effectively distributing vaccines, and preparing for future pandemics. At the nexus of DRG and COVID-19, the Biden-Harris Administration should:

- **Include DRG in COVID-19 emergency and recovery aid.** Democratic governance, and an enabling environment for civil society are critical to ensuring health, humanitarian, and economic aid quickly and effectively reach the people who need it—particularly amid heightened corruption risks.
- **Champion a comprehensive strategy to counter disinformation and misinformation.** Misinformation about COVID-19 and vaccines undermines efforts to bring the pandemic under control, and disinformation from bad actors undercuts civil society's legitimacy and stokes violence. A comprehensive strategy to address disinformation and misinformation must be triple-pronged: ensuring the production and free flow of quality information; empowering citizens with media literacy skills to recognize falsehoods; and establishing stronger accountability mechanisms for those who create, propagate, or amplify disinformation.
- **Reinvest in global anti-corruption efforts.** The pandemic has undermined existing transparency and accountability mechanisms and increased corrupt behavior, heightening risks to democratic norms and institutions already under siege.
- **Make inclusion a centerpiece of the pandemic response and beyond.** Marginalized populations are most heavily experiencing the negative health and livelihoods ramifications of the pandemic. At the same time, COVID-19 compounds existing barriers to inclusion. To ensure that the COVID-19 response and recovery is sustainable and reaches all people—including racial, ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities; indigenous peoples; displaced persons; persons with disabilities; women; and youth—they must be afforded the opportunity and means to meaningfully and equally participate in political processes and government.

### Partner with civil society for the Democracy Summit.

A Summit will provide an excellent opportunity for the world's democracies to renew their commitment to democratic institutions, develop deliverables, and forge a common agenda to address democratic decline. The challenges of corruption, authoritarianism, and threats to human rights cannot be tackled by governments alone. Civil society plays an essential role in analyzing problems, shaping policies, and implementing solutions. Through the Summit, the United States can exert leadership in strengthening democracy around the world with civil society as an equal partner. The Summit should:

- **Include the full participation of a diverse group of national and international civil society groups.** Organizations that support the political rights of women; people with disabilities; young people; racial, ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities; indigenous peoples; and displaced persons should be represented as attendees and speakers. This must also include business and labor organizations who partner with governments, as well as civil society and media groups from non-democracies to provide a broader, more inclusive analysis.
- **Create a stronger alliance of democracies and civil society partners** that can tackle 21st-century challenges confronting both emerging and established democracies.
- **Commit to providing adequate resources for democracy support over the long term.**



- **Ensure strategies for inclusive democracy are a major focus.**

## Scale up resources and mechanisms for DRG assistance.

DRG assistance cannot be effectively implemented without adequate and reliable funding. The U.S. Congress has long demonstrated bipartisan support for international democracy assistance, and increasing this funding is critical and feasible. The choice of partner in carrying out this work also matters: to be most effective, U.S. agencies must partner with credible, trusted actors, like NGOs. To make the best use of American taxpayer dollars in DRG work, the Biden-Harris Administration should:

- **In the President's budget request, include additional funding for DRG**, including via Democracy Programs and the Democracy Fund, Development Assistance, Economic Support Fund, Transition Initiatives, Complex Crises Fund, and National Endowment for Democracy appropriations accounts.
- **Prioritize grants and cooperative agreements over contracts as the preferred instruments of democracy programs.** Democracy programs are most successful when implemented by independent, non-governmental organizations with strong ties to local communities and civil society groups, which have the expertise to develop their own results-oriented program interventions.
- **Empower the USAID Ombudsman.** USAID should redefine and elevate the role of an Ombudsman to serve as a neutral intermediary between partners and the Agency with the authorities to impartially address and resolve issues, particularly related to funding instruments, in a timely manner.
- **Immediately restore funding to civil society programs, including DRG programs, in the Northern Triangle of Central America that were reprogrammed.** Robust funding for democracy programs is a key component for promoting stability, good governance, and inclusive economic growth in the region. The disruption has deeply harmed civil society partners.
- **Support bold investments for DRG** as part of an overall doubling of annual bilateral and multilateral foreign economic, health, and humanitarian assistance by 2025. The Administration can bolster its commitment to elevate democracy and human rights by requesting increased funding in the President's inaugural budget and developing a roadmap to significant investments over time. Increased investments in DRG are required to improve the impact of short-term health and humanitarian assistance, address the secondary effects of the pandemic, and help democracies prepare for future crises. Investments also are needed to strengthen government institutions and governance in democracies to better deliver public services, conduct elections, and protect rights.

## Counter rising authoritarianism.

To address the threats posed by growing illiberal influence around the world, the Biden-Harris Administration should:

- **Maintain focus on the challenges posed by the Russian and Chinese regimes.** The U.S. can and should play a role in challenging alternative governance modes, interference in vulnerable democracies, and destabilization of long-standing ones. Policy and resources must allow the U.S. to meet the unprecedented challenges authoritarians are presenting in the competition of ideas.
- **Support a positive vision for how technology can deliver on democratic principles while pushing back on digital threats.** Digital authoritarianism is widespread and is being exported—especially by Beijing as they share surveillance technologies that underpin their efforts at social control. At the same time, upcoming technologies for democratic participation and accountability are promising, balanced against their use by authoritarians to repress and control citizens.



## Elevate DRG within USAID.

Recent Congressionally-approved structural changes under USAID Transformation were driven by career USAID staff and included significant consultation with the NGO community. The DRG community appreciates the elevation of democracy within the new Development, Democracy and Innovation (DDI) Bureau and the intended positioning of the DRG Center within this Bureau to ensure that citizen-oriented governance is integrated across all sectors. These changes were designed to ensure that democracy support is not pushed aside or overridden by the crisis of the day as has been the case and to ensure DRG is elevated throughout policy and strategy. Specifically, the Biden-Harris Administration should:

- As democratic governance is a fundamental part of the larger process of development, not a discrete issue, **we recommend that the Assistant Administrator for the DDI Bureau has a strong background in democracy and governance.**
- **Require the new DDI Bureau to align with U.S. priorities of democracy promotion.** We recommend that the DRG Center's restructuring be reviewed to ensure that it appropriately acknowledges media, elections, and political transitions as distinct program areas. Explicit links should also be developed between DDI and the R3 bureaus, particularly the Bureau for Conflict Prevention and Stabilization, to ensure that conflict prevention and crisis response efforts account for the centrality of governance in conflicts.
- **Update USAID's 2013 Youth in Development Policy and make youth engagement and leadership a cross-sectoral priority.** The political activism of young people is on the rise globally because they are increasingly disaffected and have very little confidence in governing institutions (including those that are democratic). Any USAID strategy on youth should account for this dynamic.
- **Review and revise USAID's 2020 Draft Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Policy** so that it aligns with more inclusive and aspirational human rights values.

## About the Democracy, Rights, and Governance Initiative

InterAction's Democracy, Rights, and Governance Initiative convenes leaders of democracy-promoting organizations to work collectively to advocate for democratic assistance, good governance, and human rights. For more information, please contact Luci Meade. Members of the Initiative include: American Bar Association: Rule of Law Initiative (contact Kristi Gaines), Center for International Private Enterprise (Gregg Willhauck), Freedom House (contact Annie Boyajian), International Center for Not-for-profit Law (Cathy Shea), International Foundation for Electoral Systems (Angela Canterbury), International Republican Institute (Kimber Shearer), Internews (Anthony Garrett), National Democratic Institute (Jerry Hartz), Solidarity Center (Molly McCoy).

## About InterAction

InterAction is a convener, thought leader, and voice for NGOs working to eliminate extreme poverty, strengthen human rights and citizen participation, safeguard a sustainable planet, promote peace, and ensure dignity for all people.

