

U.S. Democracy and Human Rights Assistance: Recent Administration Actions

March 11, 2025

On January 20, 2025, President Trump issued an [executive order](#) imposing a 90-day “pause” on nearly all U.S. foreign assistance. Secretary of State Marco Rubio later [announced](#) a pause and review of Department of State (DOS) and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) assistance programs “to ensure they are efficient and consistent with U.S. foreign policy under the America First agenda.” Among other effects, the Administration’s aid pause halted congressionally authorized and appropriated programs intended to promote and defend democracy and human rights around the world (hereinafter referred to as democracy assistance); some existing [programs](#) have been [terminated](#). At the same time, the Administration has [taken steps](#) to downsize, reorganize, and potentially close USAID, including potentially [eliminating](#) most or all USAID positions with responsibilities related to democracy assistance. DOS also has reportedly [dismissed](#) contractor staff tasked with helping to administer democracy assistance.

The Administration’s actions have prompted legal challenges. Plaintiffs in part have [alleged](#) that the actions “usurp[] for the executive branch the legislature’s exclusive powers” by “refusing to spend what Congress has ordered[.]” In a February 18 [filing](#) in federal court, DOS described support for democracy promotion, civic society, or “regime change” as among the specific categories of USAID contracts and grants the Administration had terminated in accordance with the Administration’s priorities. On February 26, DOS [reported](#) that its foreign assistance review was complete for grants and foreign assistance and that it had terminated thousands of unspecified USAID and DOS awards.

Authorities and Appropriations for Democracy Assistance and Democracy Promotion Organizations

U.S. law (see [22 U.S.C. §2304\(a\)](#) and [22 U.S.C. §8202](#)) states that the promotion and protection of democracy, human rights, and fundamental freedoms are “principal” and “fundamental” goals of U.S. foreign policy. Foreign assistance is one of the tools the United States has used to promote democracy and human rights around the world. The [Foreign Assistance Act of 1961](#), as amended, emphasizes civil, political, and economic rights; anti-corruption and transparency; and the encouragement of democratic institutions as among the priorities of U.S. foreign assistance. Congress has appropriated funding for

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IN12523

democracy assistance principally through annual Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs (SFOPS) appropriations acts. (Regarding democracy assistance in the context of the overall foreign assistance budget, see CRS In Focus IF10183, *U.S. Foreign Assistance*.)

Most recently, within FY2024 SFOPS (Division F of P.L. 118-47) and carried forward through March 14, 2025, by P.L. 118-158, Congress directed that \$2.9 billion be made available for democracy assistance programs managed by USAID and DOS. The act defined these as

programs that support good governance, credible and competitive elections, freedom of expression, association, assembly, and religion, human rights, labor rights, independent media, and the rule of law, and that otherwise strengthen the capacity of democratic political parties, governments, nongovernmental organizations and institutions, and citizens to support the development of democratic states and institutions that are responsive and accountable to citizens.

Within the SFOPS Act language and accompanying explanatory statement, Congress directed certain amounts of democracy assistance for specific purposes (e.g., internet freedom, emergency assistance to human rights defenders, and international religious freedom) and countries (e.g., China, Cuba, and Venezuela). Congress also directed assistance for other programs that may touch on democracy or human rights matters, such as \$111 million to combat human trafficking globally.

FY2024 SFOPS separately appropriated \$315 million to the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), incorporated in 1983 as a private nonprofit organization that has supported projects to promote democracy globally and has been chiefly funded by congressional appropriations pursuant to the National Endowment for Democracy Act (NED Act; Title V of P.L. 98-164, as amended; 22 U.S.C. §4411 et seq.).

For discussion of debates about the promotion of democracy and human rights as a foreign policy goal, criticisms and challenges in evaluating the effectiveness of these efforts, and other issues, see CRS Report R47890, *Democracy and Human Rights in U.S. Foreign Policy: Evolution, Tools, and Considerations for Congress*.

Publicly Reported Program Impacts

U.S.-based and overseas organizations that have relied, in whole or in part, on U.S. government assistance to promote democracy and human rights around the world have been affected by the aid “pause” and/or related Administration actions. Impacts that have been reported publicly include, for example, the reduction or halting of work by organizations that have aimed to [promote human rights and document abuses in China and North Korea](#); [advocate for democracy in Cuba, Belarus, Burma and Venezuela](#); [support independent media and anti-corruption in Ukraine, Russia and various other countries](#); [promote religious freedom in Asia](#); [support at-risk human rights defenders around the world](#); and [advance global Internet freedom](#). Some overseas groups, including some operating in repressive societies, face restrictions on their ability to secure funding from domestic sources and have relied on support from the United States and other foreign donors. Among the U.S.-based organizations whose operations and staffing have been [affected](#) are NED and its affiliated institutes, which include the National Democratic Institute and International Republican Institute (see additional discussion below).

Officials of some [authoritarian governments](#) have [spoken positively](#) of the aid “pause” and/or of U.S. political rhetoric critical of USAID and U.S. foreign assistance. Some foreign governments have reportedly [cited](#) statements by Trump Administration officials alleging fraud at USAID to justify investigating local partner organizations.

Selected Considerations for Congress

Aid Review Process and Results. Members may assess the Administration’s broad “pause” of assistance and seek information on the review processes and evaluative criteria used. Members may inquire as to

which democracy assistance programs have been terminated and which, if any, have been retained as a result of the Administration's review, as well as the associated justifications. Congressional assessments of the Administration's review could potentially inform debate over future legislation pertinent to democracy assistance, including FY2025 or FY2026 funding levels and directives.

Consistency with Enacted Appropriations Laws. Actions such as the Administration's targeted termination of existing democracy programs may raise questions for Members about the Administration's plans and/or capacity to adhere to democracy assistance appropriations provisions that Congress has enacted in law. FY2024 SFOPS funding from pertinent accounts (e.g., the Democracy Fund) remains available for obligation until September 30, 2025.

U.S. Foreign Policy Objectives. Members may seek greater clarity from the Administration on whether and to what extent it regards the promotion of democracy and human rights as among its foreign policy objectives. Congress may weigh the Administration's views and other arguments during debates over whether to decrease, increase, or otherwise modify programmatic support for such objectives. Considerations may include assessments of the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of U.S. democracy promotion efforts and possible tensions between these efforts and the pursuit of other U.S. objectives.

Other Foreign Policy Implications. The interests of some authoritarian governments may generally be at odds with the stated objectives of U.S. democracy promotion and human rights programming. Members could assess whether the aid "pause" might have implications for U.S. interests in competing with or countering the actions of governments including China and Russia. (See also relevant discussions in R47890, linked above.)

Funding for the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). The scope of the aid "pause" as [laid out](#) by Secretary Rubio was to cover SFOPS-appropriated foreign assistance under titles III, IV, and certain assistance under Title V. NED has [alleged](#) that "the Executive Branch has denied the Endowment access to its congressionally appropriated funds" under Title I of SFOPS. In a bipartisan letter to Secretary Rubio, some Senators reportedly [described](#) such withholding of funds as being "in contravention of law." On March 5, NED filed a federal [lawsuit](#) against executive branch agencies and officials alleging "unlawful impoundment of funds that Congress appropriated for [NED]." On March 10, NED released a [statement](#) indicating a "partial restoration" of access to some of its congressionally appropriated funds. Some prior [media reports](#) speculated that NED's funding disruption may relate to the work of the "Department of Government Efficiency." Members may seek clarity regarding the authority/authorities under which NED's funding has been withheld.

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