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Democracy and Human Rights Promotion in the Trump Administration's Foreign Policy: In Brief

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Background

U.S. law states that the promotion and protection of democracy and human rights are “principal” and “fundamental” goals of U.S. foreign policy.¹ Congress, having enacted such goals, has shaped the manner and degree to which U.S. government policy strives to achieve them in practice. Since the 1970s in particular, Congress has prescribed an array of statutory provisions and associated policy tools to address matters related to democracy and human rights promotion in foreign contexts. Congress authorizes, appropriates resources for, and oversees the use of these tools.

Proponents of U.S. democracy and human rights promotion have argued for these efforts on the basis of long-term U.S. interests as well as on moral grounds. Some proponents have contended, for example, that rights-respecting democracies are more reliable U.S. partners, less likely to go to war with one another, and less frequently associated with threats to U.S. security—such as instability, terrorism, transnational crime, and migration crises—than non-democracies. Other analysts have questioned the extent to which foreign government regime types and human rights conditions abroad are vital to U.S. interests, or have expressed doubts about the effectiveness of U.S. efforts to help improve democracy and human rights conditions abroad.

The extent to which presidential Administrations have prioritized promoting democracy and human rights abroad as U.S. foreign policy objectives has varied. Administrations' political and ideological priorities also have influenced to some degree the specific issues or countries that have been the focus of democracy and human rights policies. These variations across executive branch Administrations, coupled with laws that articulate broad U.S. policy in this area and require certain executive branch actions, have resulted in both policy continuity and some discontinuities across time. Relative to other Administrations in the post-Cold War era, the second Trump Administration appears to have put less priority on the promotion of democracy and human rights in other countries as foreign policy objectives, and has asserted that some associated activities and expenditures do not align with U.S. interests.

International Perceptions of U.S. Democracy and U.S. Actions Abroad

Views vary over the extent to which international perceptions of the state of democracy in the United States—or of certain U.S. actions abroad that are seen by some observers as at odds with the protection of human rights—have implications for the credibility or effectiveness of U.S. democracy and human rights efforts. (For more information, see CRS Report R47890, *Democracy and Human Rights in U.S. Foreign Policy: Evolution, Tools, and Considerations for Congress*.) Polling conducted in 2024 by the Pew Research Center found that a median of 21% of people surveyed across 34 nations said that democracy in the United States is a good example for other countries to follow, 40% said that U.S. democracy used to be a good example but “has not been in recent years,” and 22% said that U.S. democracy has never been a good example to follow.²

According to the nongovernmental organization Freedom House, “in recent years, a number of factors—including political polarization, the growing role of money in politics, and discrimination, among others—have contributed to new infringements on fundamental rights [in the United States] and significantly hampered the ability of federal institutions to fulfill their core responsibilities with respect to budgeting, oversight, and governance.”³ Some scholars who study democracy have asserted that the second Trump Administration has undermined U.S. democratic norms and institutions across a range of areas in a manner arguably similar to some other countries that have experienced democratic backsliding, though opinions vary about the state of democracy and democratic

¹ Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, Section 502B(a)(1) (22 U.S.C. §2304(a)(1)); Advance Democratic Values, Address Nondemocratic Countries, and Enhance [ADVANCE] Democracy Act of 2007, Section 2103 (22 U.S.C. §8202). For additional background and sources on topics discussed in this section, see CRS Report R47890, *Democracy and Human Rights in U.S. Foreign Policy: Evolution, Tools, and Considerations for Congress*.

² Richard Wike et al., “Globally, Biden Receives Higher Ratings Than Trump,” Pew Research Center, June 11, 2024, pp. 33-34.

³ Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2026: United States,” March 2026.

resilience in the United States.⁴ In addition, some UN human rights experts and nongovernmental human rights organizations have alleged U.S. government responsibility for or involvement in possible enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, or other human rights violations in the context of recent immigration policy enforcement, military strikes against alleged drug traffickers, and other actions.⁵

Change in Prioritization of Democracy and Human Rights Promotion Abroad

Various statements and actions of the second Trump Administration suggest it has put less priority on democracy and human rights promotion abroad as U.S. foreign policy objectives relative to other Administrations in the post-Cold War era, including the first Trump Administration. The first Trump Administration's December 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS), for instance, framed various challenges to U.S. interests as "fundamentally political contests between those who favor repressive systems and those who favor free societies";⁶ asserted that advancing democracy had historically supported U.S. interests; encouraged other countries "to join our community of like-minded democratic states and improve the condition of their peoples"; and vowed to "continue to champion American values and offer encouragement to those struggling for human dignity in their societies."⁷ The second Trump Administration's November 2025 NSS (publicly released in December 2025) states that the United States does not seek to "impos(e)" on other countries "democratic or other social change that differs widely from their traditions or histories," except when "push[ing] like-minded friends to uphold our shared norms":

We seek good relations and peaceful commercial relations with the nations of the world without imposing on them democratic or other social change that differs widely from their traditions and histories. We recognize and affirm that there is nothing inconsistent or hypocritical in acting according to such a realistic assessment or in maintaining good relations with countries whose governing systems and societies differ from ours even as we push like-minded friends to uphold our shared norms, furthering our interests as we do

⁴ See, for example, Steven Levitsky et al., "The Price of American Authoritarianism," *Foreign Affairs*, December 11, 2025; McKenzie Carrier and Thomas Carothers, "U.S. Democratic Backsliding in Comparative Perspective," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 25, 2025. See also Jonathan Schulman and Richard Wike, "Multiple Indicators Show a Decline in the Health of America's Democracy in 2025," Pew Research Center, April 15, 2026.

⁵ For example, see UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), "US Deportations Raise Serious Human Rights Concerns," May 13, 2025; OHCHR, "US attacks in Caribbean and Pacific Violate International Human Rights Law – UN Human Rights Chief," October 31, 2025; OHCHR, "Unprovoked Lethal Strikes by the United States Against Vessels at Sea May Amount to International Crimes: UN Experts," November 4, 2025; OHCHR, "The United States Must Respect Right to Life and Urgently Review Lethal-Force Practices at Sea, Abroad and at Home: UN Expert," January 15, 2026; OHCHR, "USA: Racial Profiling and Racist Hate Speech by Political Leaders Heightened Human Rights Violations Against Migrants and Asylum Seekers, UN Committee Warns," March 11, 2026; Human Rights Watch, "You Have Arrived in Hell": Torture and Other Abuses Against Venezuelans in El Salvador's Mega Prison," November 12, 2025; Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2026*, February 2026.

⁶ The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017, p. 25.

⁷ The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017, pp. 37-38. The document contained a section describing an objective to "Champion American Values" that in part read: "Governments that respect the rights of their citizens remain the best vehicle for prosperity, human happiness, and peace. In contrast, governments that routinely abuse the rights of their citizens do not play constructive roles in the world. For example, governments that fail to treat women equally do not allow their societies to reach their potential. No nation can unilaterally alleviate all human suffering, but just because we cannot help everyone does not mean that we should stop trying to help anyone.... We support, with our words and actions, those who live under oppressive regimes and who seek freedom, individual dignity, and the rule of law." The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017, pp. 41-42.

so.... We will oppose elite-driven, anti-democratic restrictions on core liberties in Europe, the Anglosphere, and the rest of the democratic world, especially among our allies.⁸

The 2025 NSS appears to be the first NSS document in the post-Cold War era that does not articulate objectives related to the promotion of democratic values globally.⁹ Consistent with the 2025 NSS, the State Department's 2026-2030 strategic plan, released in January 2026, does not describe a general goal of promoting democracy and human rights.¹⁰ Several actions by the second Trump Administration also suggest movement away from prioritizing democracy and human rights promotion abroad as U.S. foreign policy objectives. Among them:

- In early 2025, the Trump Administration initiated a review of nearly all foreign assistance, paused assistance programs globally, and then reportedly terminated most democracy and human rights projects administered by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the State Department. In general, such programs had been congressionally directed to support good governance, credible elections, human rights, the rule of law, and related aims. The Administration also sought to withhold appropriated funding for the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a private nonprofit organization that promotes democracy globally and has been chiefly funded by congressional appropriations pursuant to the National Endowment for Democracy Act.¹¹ The Administration later proposed, and Congress approved, rescinding a substantial amount of FY2025 funding for foreign assistance accounts used to fund democracy assistance.¹² A subsequent August 2025 “pocket rescission” proposal by the Administration resulted in the further cancellation of funding appropriated in prior years for such accounts, without action from Congress.¹³ The Administration largely dismantled USAID, which has generally administered funding for a large portion of U.S. democracy promotion assistance.¹⁴
- The Administration in early 2025 initiated a broad reorganization of the State Department in order to, according to Secretary of State Marco Rubio, consolidate

⁸ The White House, *National Security Strategy*, November 2025. In its discussion of the Middle East region, the NSS further states that “Middle East partners are demonstrating their commitment to combatting radicalism, a trendline American policy should continue to encourage. But doing so will require dropping America’s misguided experiment with hectoring these nations—especially the Gulf monarchies—into abandoning their traditions and historic forms of government. We should encourage and applaud reform when and where it emerges organically, without trying to impose it from without.”

⁹ CRS review of NSS documents.

¹⁰ U.S. Department of State, *Agency Strategic Plan - Fiscal Years 2026-2030*, January 2026.

¹¹ Title V of P.L. 98-164, as amended; 22 U.S.C. §§4411 et seq. The White House, “Reevaluating and Realigning United States Foreign Aid,” January 20, 2025; CRS Insight IN12523, *U.S. Democracy and Human Rights Assistance: Recent Administration Actions*; Elissa Miolene, “How the US Government Let Support for Democracy Unravel,” *Devex*, May 22, 2025; Global Democracy Coalition, “When Aid Fades: Impacts and Pathways for the Global Democracy Ecosystem,” November 2025.

¹² According to the rescissions proposal, the Democracy Fund account, for example, “support[s] programs that undermine American values, interfere with the sovereignty of other countries, or bankroll corrupt leaders’ evasion of their responsibilities to their citizens.” The White House, rescissions proposal of May 28, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Proposed-Rescissions-of-Budgetary-Resources.pdf>; P.L. 119-28.

¹³ The White House, rescissions proposal of August 28, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Proposed-Rescissions-of-Budgetary-Resources-August-28-2025.pdf>; CRS Legal Sidebar LSB11374, *Pocket Rescissions and the Impoundment Control Act: Legal Authority and Options for Congress*; Ann E. Marimow, “Supreme Court Allows Trump to Slash Foreign Aid,” *New York Times*, September 26, 2025.

¹⁴ See CRS In Focus IF10261, *U.S. Agency for International Development: An Overview*.

region-specific functions, remove “redundant offices,” and eliminate “non-statutory programs that are misaligned with America’s core national interests.”¹⁵ The reorganization entailed the elimination of the Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights and the closure of most offices of the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) as well as certain other human rights-related offices.¹⁶ The DRL Assistant Secretary position, which is statutorily mandated, was retained.¹⁷

- Consistent with policy under the first Trump Administration, President Trump in February 2025 stated that the United States would not seek election to the UN Human Rights Council and directed that U.S. funding be withheld from the Council, arguing that it “has protected human rights abusers by allowing them to use the organization to shield themselves from scrutiny.”¹⁸ In contrast with prior Administrations (including the first Trump Administration), the Administration has declined to participate in the Council’s Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the United States’ human rights record.¹⁹ In January 2026, President Trump announced that the United States would withdraw from several other international organizations related to democracy and human rights (among other international organizations).²⁰
- In July 2025, Secretary of State Rubio reportedly put in place a policy generally restricting the State Department from publicly commenting on the fairness or integrity of foreign elections “or the democratic values of the country in question.”²¹ The policy reportedly cited “the administration’s emphasis on national sovereignty.”²² Under most prior Administrations in the post-Cold War era, the State Department had publicly criticized foreign electoral processes that the department assessed fell short of standards for free and fair elections. The State Department has continued to reference shared democratic values in some public statements about foreign elections.²³

¹⁵ U.S. Department of State, “Building an America First State Department,” April 22, 2025.

¹⁶ Robbie Gramer, “Rubio Outlines Plans to Drastically Cut Human Rights Offices in State,” *Politico*, May 29, 2025. According to Secretary Rubio, the DRL bureau under prior Administrations had become “a platform for left-wing activists to wage vendettas against ‘anti-woke’ leaders in nations such as Poland, Hungary, and Brazil, and to transform their hatred of Israel into concrete policies such as arms embargoes.” See Secretary of State Rubio, “A New State Department to Meet the Challenges of a New Era,” U.S. Department of State Substack, April 22, 2025.

¹⁷ 22 U.S.C. §2651a(c)(2). For information on DRL operational funding and staffing levels following the reorganization, see U.S. Department of State, *Congressional Budget Justification (CBJ) Appendix 1 – Fiscal Year 2027*, May 2026, pp. 227-231.

¹⁸ The White House, “Withdrawing the United States From and Ending Funding to Certain United Nations Organizations and Reviewing United States Support to All International Organizations,” February 4, 2025.

¹⁹ UN Human Rights Council, “Human Rights Council Reschedules Human Rights Review of the United States of America; Regrets ‘Non-cooperation’ with UPR Mechanism,” November 7, 2025.

²⁰ The White House, “Withdrawing the United States from International Organizations, Conventions, and Treaties that Are Contrary to the Interests of the United States,” January 7, 2026.

²¹ Michael Crowley and Julian E. Barnes, “Rubio Restricts U.S. Criticism of Tainted Foreign Elections,” *New York Times*, July 18, 2025.

²² Robbie Gramer and Alexander Ward, “U.S. to Curtail Practice of Assessing Fairness of Foreign Elections,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 17, 2025.

²³ For example, see U.S. Department of State, “Suriname’s Election,” July 7, 2025.

- The Administration in August 2025 “streamlined” the scope of the State Department’s most recent annual human rights reports;²⁴ the narrowed scope and substance of the reports drew criticisms from some human rights organizations. See related discussion below and CRS In Focus IF10795, *Global Human Rights: The Department of State’s Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*. To date, the State Department has not released statutorily mandated annual reports on International Religious Freedom (IRF) covering calendar years 2024 and 2025.²⁵
- The Administration in 2025 used targeted human rights sanctions tools less frequently than the Biden and first Trump Administrations did, according to a data comparison by a nongovernmental human rights organization.²⁶

Some actions by the Trump Administration have prompted legal challenges related to, in part, whether such actions usurped congressional powers.²⁷ Relatedly, some observers have argued that the Administration’s reorganizations and staffing cuts have implications for the capacity of the executive branch to implement democracy- and human rights-related laws.²⁸

The Trump Administration has addressed democracy- and human rights-related issues abroad in some contexts. For example, the Administration has imposed targeted sanctions in response to democracy- or human rights-related issues in several countries, including Honduras, Nicaragua, Cuba, Iran, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), among others.²⁹ The Administration also has taken some policy actions related to promoting IRF, including a visa restriction policy for individuals involved in religious freedom violations announced in December 2025.³⁰ After many IRF foreign assistance programs were reportedly terminated following the aforementioned 2025 U.S. foreign aid review,³¹ the State Department in 2026 began soliciting proposals for some new IRF assistance programs.³²

²⁴ U.S. Department of State, “2024 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices,” August 12, 2025.

²⁵ For background on the annual International Religious Freedom Report, see CRS In Focus IF10803, *Global Human Rights: International Religious Freedom Policy*.

²⁶ Human Rights First, “U.S. Global Magnitsky and Related Sanctions: End of Year Update,” March 9, 2026.

²⁷ For instance, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) in March 2025 filed a federal lawsuit alleging that executive branch agencies and officials had unlawfully impounded funds that Congress appropriated for NED. See *National Endowment for Democracy v. United States*, 1:25-cv-648 (D.D.C. filed Mar. 5, 2025); Katherine Tully-McManus, “Trump-Backed Judge Rules Administration’s Withholding of Funds Illegal,” *Politico*, August 11, 2025.

²⁸ For example, see Scott Busby and Charles O. (Cob) Blaha, “How the Proposed State Department Reorganization Guts U.S. Human Rights Diplomacy,” *Just Security*, June 6, 2025.

²⁹ U.S. Department of State, “Visa Restrictions on Honduran Government Officials Interfering with the 2025 Election Vote Count,” December 19, 2025; U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Sanctions Nicaraguan Officials Enabling the Murillo-Ortega Dictatorship’s Repression,” February 26, 2026; U.S. Department of State, “Sanctions to Counter Threats Posed by the Cuban Regime,” May 18, 2026; U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Secretary Bessent Announces Sanctions Against Architects of Iran’s Brutal Crackdown on Peaceful Protests,” January 15, 2026; U.S. Department of State, “Announcement of Additional Visa Restriction Targets for Individuals Involved in Inhibiting Iranians’ Rights to Freedom of Expression,” February 18, 2026; U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Sanctions Rebel Commanders Driving Conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo,” June 2, 2026; U.S. Department of State, “Continuing to Promote Accountability for the Murillo-Ortega Dictatorship,” June 8, 2026.

³⁰ U.S. Department of State, “Combating Egregious Anti-Christian Violence in Nigeria and Globally,” December 3, 2025. See also U.S. Department of State, “United States and Hungary Partner on Advancing Religious Freedom in the Middle East and Africa,” February 4, 2026.

³¹ U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, *2026 Annual Report*, March 2026.

³² U.S. Department of State, “International Religious Freedom Fund (I-REFF) Emergency Assistance,” January 14, 2026; U.S. Department of State, “IRF FY25 Nigeria Documentation and Accountability for Religious Freedom Abuses,” May 22, 2026; U.S. Department of State, “IRF FY25 Nigeria Strengthening Capacity of the Legal Community,” May 22, 2026.

The Administration has also cited democracy- or human rights-related rationales in connection with overseas military operations, though such issues have generally not been the primary stated reason for these actions. The Administration described December 2025 U.S. military strikes against Islamic State targets in Nigeria as intended to protect Christians suffering violence.³³ In Venezuela, the Administration did not emphasize the restoration of democracy as an immediate objective following the January 2026 U.S. operation to capture and arrest President Nicolás Maduro. Secretary of State Rubio has described a long-term objective of free and fair elections in the country.³⁴ The Administration has backed Maduro's vice president to serve as acting president rather than opposition leaders that the State Department previously recognized as having won Venezuela's 2024 presidential election, and U.S. engagement following Maduro's ouster to date has focused primarily on stabilizing Venezuela's economic situation.³⁵ In Iran, President Trump referred to facilitating regime change and freedom for the Iranian people as among the objectives of the U.S. military campaign launched in February 2026. The Administration has since stated at times that its objectives have largely been achieved, even as Iran's repressive government remains in place.³⁶ Some U.S. actions and Administration statements during the Iran conflict (including a social media post in April 2026 that referred to "destroy[ing]" Iran's "civilization") appear incongruent with stated democracy-related goals, and some observers have raised human rights or humanitarian law concerns.³⁷

Emphasis on Ideological and Political Priorities

The Administration has justified some of its actions to curtail certain U.S. policy efforts related to the promotion of democracy and human rights abroad as respecting the sovereignty of other countries.³⁸ Some Administration actions or reported plans appear also to reflect the Administration's ideological and political priorities. The Administration has described some actions as a correction to "left-wing" or "liberal" ideology supported under prior U.S. policy.³⁹

³³ Helene Cooper et al., "U.S. Strikes ISIS in Nigeria After Trump Warned of Attacks on Christians," *New York Times*, December 25, 2025.

³⁴ Testimony of Secretary of State Marco Rubio in U.S. Congress, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, "Review of the FY27 State Department Budget Request," June 2, 2026; CRS Insight IN12618, *U.S. Capture of Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro: Considerations for Congress*.

³⁵ CRS Report R48960, *U.S. Foreign Policy in the Western Hemisphere: Issues for Congress*; Anatoly Kurmanaev and Tyler Pager, "Trump's Advice to Venezuela's Democracy Champion: Don't Go Home," *New York Times*, March 12, 2026; Anatoly Kurmanaev and Tyler Pager, "U.S. Undercuts Venezuela's Opposition Leader as She Tries to Return," *New York Times*, June 30, 2026; U.S. Department of State, "Secretary Rubio's Call with the Rightful President of Venezuela González Urrutia and Venezuelan Democratic Opposition Leader Machado," January 22, 2025.

³⁶ Associated Press, "Read President Trump's Statement on Iran in Full," February 28, 2026; Amy B. Wang and Mariana Alfaro, "Trump started the Iran war with 5 goals. How far has he gotten?," *Washington Post*, April 10, 2026. See also CRS Report R48887, *U.S. Conflict with Iran*.

³⁷ Tom Dannenbaum et al., "Over 100 International Law Experts Warn: U.S. Strikes on Iran Violate UN Charter and May Be War Crimes," *Just Security*, April 2, 2026; Charlie Savage, "Trump's Iran Threats Look Like Self-Incrimination for Potential War Crimes," *New York Times*, April 7, 2026; PEN America, "Human Rights and Humanitarian Organizations and Experts Call for an End to Trump's Threats of War Crimes and Commit to Pursuing Accountability," April 7, 2026; OHCHR, "Ending War Between USA-Israel and Iran Must Focus on Human Rights of Iranians: UN experts," March 30, 2026.

³⁸ For example, the Administration justified proposed rescissions of democracy assistance funds in part by asserting that these accounts had supported programs that "interfere[d] with the sovereignty of other countries," and "conducted censorship and election meddling in foreign countries." See White House rescissions proposals cited above.

³⁹ For instance, the November 2025 NSS states, "For far too long, American policy in Africa has focused on providing, and later on spreading, liberal ideology." See also quote from Secretary Rubio in footnote 16.

Changes to State Department Human Rights Reports. The statutory requirements for the State Department's annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices mandate a "full and complete report" on the status of "internationally recognized human rights" in foreign countries. These provisions also specifically require discussion of some issues (e.g., press freedom), but do not explicitly mandate coverage of most human rights.⁴⁰ Some prior Administrations in the post-Cold War era have added or removed certain non-statutorily required topics from the reports to reflect their priorities, while maintaining an otherwise heretofore broadly consistent structure and substantive scope. In August 2025, the State Department "streamlined" the scope of the reports covering 2024,⁴¹ removing coverage of several human rights topics that are set out in international human rights documents and that had been included in prior iterations of the reports since at least 1990, but that are not specifically required in statute.⁴² These include fair trial rights, privacy rights, freedom of peaceful assembly and association, freedom of movement, freedom to participate in the political process/elections, and discrimination. Other topics that had been included in the reports for roughly two decades were also removed.⁴³

In November 2025, the State Department reportedly issued internal instructions that, in preparation for the Country Reports on Human Rights Practices covering 2025, U.S. diplomatic missions were to report on several topics of concern to the Trump Administration, including diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) policies; the prevalence of abortion; gender-transition surgery among children; and mass migration.⁴⁴ These topics are not statutorily required and have not been included in prior iterations of the reports. According to one media report, the State Department also directed staff not to cite any nongovernmental source that advances policies inconsistent with Administration executive orders (e.g., concerning DEI).⁴⁵ The reports covering 2025 were statutorily due to Congress by February 25, 2026. They have not yet been released as of the date of this report.

Emphasis on Europe and Support for Foreign Ideological Allies. Trump Administration statements and documents suggest that the Administration intends to emphasize purported challenges to human rights and democracy within the democracies of Europe—a shift from the focus of many prior Administrations, which generally focused on fledgling democracies and authoritarian states with poor human rights records.⁴⁶ The aforementioned State Department reorganization created new offices and positions reportedly to focus in part on "criticisms of free speech backsliding in Europe and other developed nations," while eliminating long-standing DRL geographic offices that focused on democracy- and human rights-related issues in other regions

⁴⁰ See 22 U.S.C. §2151n and 22 U.S.C. §2304.

⁴¹ U.S. Department of State, "2024 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices," August 12, 2025.

⁴² CRS review of annual State Department *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* beginning with the reports covering calendar year 1990.

⁴³ These include government corruption and internet freedom.

⁴⁴ Tom Bateman, "New US Rules Say Countries with Diversity Policies are Infringing Human Rights," *BBC News*, November 21, 2025; Adam Taylor and Hannah Natanson, "Under Trump, U.S. Human Rights Reports Will Flag Abortion, Gender Care," *Washington Post*, November 20, 2025.

⁴⁵ If implemented, such direction could preclude the reports from citing numerous nongovernmental human rights organizations whose reports have traditionally been cited by the State Department. See reporting by Daniel Lippman in *Politico's National Security Daily*, February 4, 2026 ("How Israel is Navigating its Next Bid for US funding"); Amnesty International, "Rights Groups Raise Alarm Over Reports of State Department's Restriction on Human Rights Sources for Annual Human Rights Report," February 6, 2026.

⁴⁶ Research organizations that seek to assess the level of democracy in countries around the world generally score the countries of Western Europe as among the most democratic in the world, with most assigned higher scores than the United States, as of data from calendar year 2025. See, for example, Freedom House's *Freedom in the World* country and territory scores accessible at <https://freedomhouse.org/country/scores>; Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute, *Democracy Report 2026: Unraveling the Democratic Era?*, March 2026.

around the world.⁴⁷ The Administration's 2025 NSS appears to be the first NSS document to raise democracy- and human rights-related concerns about the longstanding democracies of Europe.⁴⁸ The 2025 NSS states that the United States will prioritize "cultivating resistance to Europe's current trajectory within European nations," which risks "civilizational erasure" from "activities of the European Union and other transnational bodies that undermine political liberty and sovereignty, migration policies that are transforming the continent and creating strife, censorship of free speech and suppression of political opposition, cratering birthrates, and loss of national identities and self-confidence." The NSS expresses support for "the growing influence of patriotic European parties." Some media reports indicate that the Administration is exploring efforts to fund ideologically aligned think tanks and policy groups in Western Europe.⁴⁹

The Administration has openly advocated for its favored political leaders or parties in some foreign elections. Ahead of April 2026 elections in Hungary, for example, the Administration urged Hungarians to support the ruling government under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.⁵⁰ (Nongovernmental democracy research organizations assess that Hungary experienced democratic backsliding under Orbán, who, prior to his party's defeat in the 2026 elections, had led Hungary since 2010.⁵¹) President Trump also has used carrots and sticks to support ideologically aligned political figures in Latin America and in some cases has overtly pledged to condition positive bilateral relations on his favored political leaders or parties prevailing in elections.⁵² Some critics have argued that the Administration has used human rights sanctions tools in some instances to support the President's foreign political allies or punish disfavored figures.⁵³

Statutory provisions concerning democracy and human rights promotion objectives and policy tools broadly emphasize developing democracy- and human rights-supportive principles,

⁴⁷ Robbie Gramer, "Rubio Outlines Plans to Drastically Cut Human Rights Offices in State," *Politico*, May 29, 2025. See also Samuel Samson, "The Need for Civilizational Allies in Europe," U.S. Department of State, May 27, 2025; U.S. Department of State, "Announcement of a Visa Restriction Policy Targeting Foreign Nationals Who Censor Americans," May 28, 2025; U.S. Department of State, "Announcement of Actions to Combat the Global Censorship-Industrial Complex," December 23, 2025; Fatima Hussein, "US Bars Five Europeans it Says Pressured Tech Firms to Censor American Viewpoints Online," *Associated Press*, December 24, 2025.

⁴⁸ CRS Review of NSS documents. Several prior NSS referred to the democracies of Western Europe and/or the European Union as partners in promoting and defending democracy. See, for example, The White House (George W. Bush Administration), *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, March 2006, pp. 38-39; The White House (Obama Administration), *National Security Strategy*, May 2010, p. 42; The White House (Trump Administration), *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017, pp. 47-48; and The White House (Biden Administration), *National Security Strategy*, October 2022, pp. 38-39.

⁴⁹ Karl Mathiesen et al., "The MAGA-Friendly European Think Tanks Trump Wants to Fund," *Politico*, February 13, 2026; Sam Skove, "Can the State Department Make Europe Great Again?," *Foreign Policy*, June 1, 2026.

⁵⁰ CQ TranscriptsWire, "VPOTUS: Vice President Vance Holds a Political Rally with Viktor Orban in Budapest," April 7, 2026; Donald J. Trump Truth Social Post (@realDonaldTrump), April 9, 2026. See also U.S. Department of State, "Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban at a Joint Press Availability," February 16, 2026.

⁵¹ See, for example, Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2026: Hungary," <https://freedomhouse.org/country/hungary/freedom-world/2026>.

⁵² CRS Report R48960, *U.S. Foreign Policy in the Western Hemisphere: Issues for Congress*; CRS Report R46236, *Brazil: Background and U.S. Relations*; Jack Nicas and Annie Correal, "Trump Becomes the Wild Card in Razor-Thin Honduras Election," *New York Times*, December 1, 2025; Seung Min Kim and Isabel Debre, "Trump Threatens to Pull Support for Argentina if its Politics Move Leftward," *Associated Press*, October 14, 2025; Annie Correal, "Trump Endorses Right-Wing Presidential Candidate in Colombia," *New York Times*, June 2, 2026.

⁵³ CRS In Focus IF10576, *Human Rights and Anti-Corruption Sanctions: The Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act*; Chiara Eisner and Robert Benincasa, "How Trump's Treasury is Shifting Sanctions to Punish His Critics and Reward Friends," NPR, March 17, 2026.

practices, and institutions in foreign countries.⁵⁴ Some provisions impose restrictions on seeking particular electoral outcomes. Section 116(e) of the Foreign Assistance Act, which authorizes certain foreign assistance for purposes of promoting civil and political rights, states that “none of these funds may be used, directly or indirectly, to influence the outcome of any election in any country.”⁵⁵ At the same time, appropriations acts have generally provided the executive branch with broad flexibility by specifying that democracy assistance programs may be implemented “notwithstanding” other provisions of law.⁵⁶

Congressional Response

Views vary among Members of Congress over how and to what extent U.S. foreign policy should emphasize promotion of and assistance for democracy and human rights abroad. In the 119th Congress, some congressional statements and enacted legislation appear to reflect broad support for U.S. foreign policy to continue addressing these issues.⁵⁷ Members have had contrasting reactions to some democracy- and human rights-related actions by the Administration (e.g., foreign assistance terminations and pertinent aspects of the State Department reorganization).⁵⁸ Congressional interests and priorities with respect to these issues have been expressed in part through enacted appropriations legislation. In response to an Administration proposal, Congress enacted a law (P.L. 119-28) in July 2025 that rescinded funding for several foreign assistance accounts, including some used to fund democracy assistance programs. In February 2026, Congress enacted the FY2026 National Security, Department of State, and Related Programs Appropriations Act (NSRP; Division F of P.L. 119-75), which directed that \$2.175 billion should be made available for democracy assistance programs.⁵⁹ This compares to \$2.9 billion directed for such programs in FY2025 (as carried forward from FY2024 through continuing resolutions).

The FY2026 NSRP includes a broad definition of democracy assistance programs consistent with that included in prior appropriations laws,⁶⁰ while the accompanying explanatory statement specifies that such programs are to focus on “adversarial, anti-American countries, countries whose malign activities pose a national security threat to the United States, or countries seeking to strengthen democratic institutions and processes.”⁶¹ Reflecting USAID’s now-diminished role,

⁵⁴ For example, see 22 U.S.C. §8202.

⁵⁵ 22 U.S.C. §2151n(e).

⁵⁶ See, most recently, Section 7032(b)(1) of P.L. 119-75.

⁵⁷ See, for example, the Western Balkans Democracy and Prosperity Act, enacted as part of the FY2026 National Defense Authorization Act (Section 8331-8341 of P.L. 119-60); House Foreign Affairs Committee, “Mast, Meeks, Risch, and Shaheen Call on Trump Administration to Speak Out Against Sham Elections in Burma,” November 26, 2025; Senate Foreign Relations Committee, “Ranking Member Shaheen, Senators Curtis, Durbin, Cruz, Kaine and Scott Bipartisan Statement on Venezuela,” February 12, 2026.

⁵⁸ See, for example, remarks by Members during House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing, “The USAID Betrayal,” February 13, 2025; Senate Foreign Relations Committee, “Ranking Member Shaheen, Democratic Colleagues Send Letter Urging Rubio to Preserve the State Department’s Human Rights Bureau,” June 16, 2025.

⁵⁹ Similar to prior appropriations laws, the law states that funds for democracy programs “may be made available notwithstanding any other provision of law.” See Section 7032(b)(1).

⁶⁰ Section 7032(c) defines “democracy programs” to mean “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.”

⁶¹ See explanatory statement accessible at https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/fy26_sfops_jes.pdf. The bill text and explanatory statement direct some democracy assistance resources for particular countries or issues, (continued...)

the law appropriates democracy assistance-related foreign assistance accounts solely to the State Department, including \$205 million in Democracy Fund resources to be managed by the DRL bureau.⁶² The accompanying explanatory statement requires regular reporting to Congress on terminated foreign assistance awards that had been funded using prior year appropriations and, separately, on the status of FY2026 appropriated funds (i.e., the amounts apportioned, allocated, obligated, and disbursed).

Separate from the aforementioned foreign assistance appropriations, the FY2026 NSRP appropriates \$315 million for NED, the same level as in FY2025 (as carried forward from FY2024 through continuing resolutions).⁶³ The law also retains several long-standing recurring foreign policy provisions related to democracy and human rights promotion.⁶⁴ The explanatory statement requires a report detailing changes to Leahy Law human rights vetting of foreign security force units resulting from the State Department's 2025 reorganization.⁶⁵

In April 2026, the House Appropriations Committee reported a FY2027 NSRP bill (H.R. 8595; H.Rept. 119-631) that, if enacted, would direct that \$2.175 billion be made available for democracy assistance programs and would appropriate \$296.1 million for NED.⁶⁶

Options for Congress

Congress for decades has debated the integration of democracy and human rights promotion concerns in the conduct of U.S. foreign policy, at times pushing the executive branch to place greater and more consistent emphasis on these objectives. As it has with prior Administrations, Congress may conduct oversight over executive branch actions and consider whether to accept, reject, or seek to modify the executive branch's policy approach. Members may consider whether to take legislative or other action to further prescribe U.S. policy related to promoting democracy and human rights abroad in a manner reflective of congressional priorities. More broadly, Congress may assess the effectiveness of U.S. efforts to promote democracy and human rights abroad, and consider the prioritization of such efforts relative to other U.S. foreign policy objectives. Possible options for Congress include the following:

- Assessing the effectiveness of U.S. policies and activities to promote democracy and human rights abroad in advancing U.S. foreign policy interests over the decades and considering possible lessons learned or potential reforms.
- Considering the extent to which existing statutory provisions related to the promotion of democracy and protection of human rights abroad in U.S. foreign policy reflect the current views of Congress.

although there appear to be fewer such directives than in recent prior years (e.g., the explanatory statement does not contain specific budget allocations for DRL programs in particular countries or to address specific issues, as was the case in prior years).

⁶² The law also rescinds \$57 million in unobligated Democracy Fund balances from prior appropriations laws made available to USAID's Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance.

⁶³ The Trump Administration's FY2026 budget request proposed eliminating funding for NED. See U.S. Department of State, *Congressional Budget Justification – Fiscal Year 2026*, May 2025, p. 110.

⁶⁴ For example, a provision restricting visas for foreign government officials implicated in corruption or human rights violations (Section 7031(c)).

⁶⁵ For background, see CRS In Focus IF10575, *Global Human Rights: Security Forces Vetting ("Leahy Laws")*.

⁶⁶ As reported out of committee, the bill states that none of the funds appropriated for NED "may be made available to an organization involved in attempting to influence elections in North Atlantic Treaty Organization member countries."

- Considering how much, if any, funding to direct for foreign assistance programs to promote democracy and human rights abroad and whether and how to take steps to ensure any such appropriations are expended in accordance with congressional intent. Such consideration may be informed by review of assessments of the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of prior programs, assessments of the impacts of the democracy assistance terminations in 2025, and review of the Administration's budget request or other Administration documents.
- Prescribing that U.S. democracy promotion activities focus on particular countries, categories of countries, or issues (e.g., Congress may consider the extent to which, if at all, democracy assistance resources should focus on longstanding, established democracies, versus fledgling democracies and countries with authoritarian governments or poor human rights records).
- Conducting oversight over U.S. government activities that entail one-sided support for particular political groups or figures within foreign democracies, particularly in the context of elections. Were Congress to assess that such activities are contrary to U.S. interests, Congress could consider placing limits on executive branch activities, such as by enacting legislation barring funding from being used to influence overseas election outcomes. Conversely, were Congress to assess that such activities support U.S. interests, Congress could consider maintaining or enhancing the executive branch's ability to take such action.
- Further shaping the particular democracy and human rights promotion-related objectives that U.S. foreign policy emphasizes, such as by amending the statutory requirements for the State Department's annual human rights reports. Such amendments could, for example, articulate a more (or less) prescriptive overarching topical scope or require increased (or decreased) coverage of specific issues.
- Conducting oversight of the executive branch's implementation of existing statutory requirements related to democracy and human rights promotion abroad, including assessing the impact of the State Department's reorganization and related staffing cuts.
- Assessing the effectiveness and implications of the Administration's shifting greater responsibility for democracy and human rights promotion policy and foreign assistance to the State Department's regional bureaus (as opposed to functional bureaus/offices within the State Department, such as the DRL bureau, or USAID). Based on such assessment, Congress may choose to endorse and possibly codify the Administration's approach, may seek to establish or re-establish functional offices to focus on issues related to democracy and human rights and/or direct resources to support the work of such offices, or may pursue other institutional arrangements and bureaucratic entities.

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