



The U.S. Summit for Democracy

December 6, 2021

On December 9-10, the United States is to convene a virtual “[Summit for Democracy](#),” with participation by leaders of foreign governments, civil society organizations, and the private sector. Leading up to the event, the U.S. government is hosting [side events](#), including inter-parliamentary sessions facilitated by the [House Democracy Partnership](#). Roughly a year after the virtual Summit, the Biden Administration anticipates a second, in-person Summit to follow up on commitments made at the initial meeting. U.S. commitments made at the Summit could prompt congressional oversight and/or legislation and affect appropriations decisions.

Background and Summit Origins

Experts contend that the world is experiencing an ongoing global “[democratic recession](#).” Global [indexes](#) generally [indicate](#) that the aggregate level of democracy—as measured on dimensions such as the extent of free and fair elections, the rule of law, and respect for fundamental freedoms—has not advanced since around 2006; further, some amount of overall democratic backsliding or “autocratization” has occurred in more recent years. A variety of factors may be affecting democracy and human rights around the world, including dissatisfaction with government performance within many democracies; evolving regulatory and technological means by which governments are able to repress political dissent; and the international influence of powerful authoritarian governments. Democracy’s global appeal—though [resilient](#)—may also be [challenged](#) to some extent by the example of economically successful authoritarian countries and the erosion of some democratic institutions within leading democracies, including the [United States](#).

As a candidate, Joe Biden [pledged](#) that the United States would host a Summit for Democracy to “bring together the world’s democracies to strengthen our democratic institutions, honestly confront nations that are backsliding, and forge a common agenda.” Biden stated that the Summit would build on the model of the [Nuclear Security Summit](#) process instituted during the Obama Administration. The planned Summit reflects the Biden Administration’s broader focus on democracy as a major concept undergirding its foreign policy strategy. The Administration’s March 2021 [Interim National Security Strategic Guidance](#) (INSSG) states that “authoritarianism is on the global march” and pledges to “join with likeminded allies and partners to revitalize democracy the world over.”

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Agenda and Themes

The White House has indicated that the virtual summit will be organized around three themes: 1) defending against authoritarianism; 2) combating corruption; and 3) promoting human rights. The Administration [has stated](#) that the United States is consulting with governments, multilateral organizations, civil society, and the private sector to solicit ideas around these three principal themes. The Summit is intended to “provide a platform for leaders to announce both individual and collective commitments ... to defend democracy and human rights at home and abroad.” The Administration has not otherwise publicly described what commitments it hopes will be made at the Summit, although there are [reports](#) about some planned [initiatives](#). A State Department [description](#) of broad factors affecting democracy globally refers to political polarization, weak state capacity, inequality, corruption, and transnational actions by authoritarian governments, among other challenges. Some Members of Congress have [raised concerns](#) over lack of outreach from the executive branch regarding the Summit’s agenda.

Participants

A major question in the lead up to the Summit has been whether the Administration would weigh strategic considerations alongside democratic credentials in determining which governments to invite. The Administration invited a total of [111 governments](#), but has not publicly articulated the criteria that guided invitation decisions beyond a [stated](#) desire to be “as inclusive as possible” and ensure participation among “a regionally diverse set of well-established and younger democracies whose progress and commitments will advance a more just and peaceful world.” Prior to publication of the official invitation list, a [November letter](#) by some Senators to President Biden urged clarity regarding the criteria for determining government invites, and inquired about civil society and congressional participation at the Summit, among other matters.

In general, the invitation list and accompanying executive branch messaging appear to reflect considerations that include the state and trajectory of democracy in foreign countries; the willingness of governments to commit to pro-democracy initiatives; and U.S. geopolitical interests. The list may be a product of numerous discrete bureaucratic debates within the State Department as much as it is a reflection of consistently applied criteria. The list includes some countries that score poorly on democracy indexes and/or that have sustained significant democratic decline in recent years, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Pakistan, and the Philippines. Notable non-invited governments that are U.S. NATO allies include Hungary and Turkey. According to [one analysis](#), 69% of invited governments represent countries rated “free” by Freedom House for 2020, 28% rated “partly free,” and 3% rated “not free.”

Some [analysts](#) have [argued](#) that the presence of non-democratic countries could dilute the stated focus of the event and negatively affect Summit outcomes. [Experts](#) have also [raised](#) questions over whether declining global perceptions of the strength of democracy in the United States could diminish U.S. efforts to galvanize international action. Notably, the Administration’s INSSG includes a focus on “revitalizing” democracy at home in addition to abroad, and the State Department has [indicated](#) that the United States will announce its own domestic and international commitments at the Summit across a range of possible areas. Aside from governments, some [analysts](#) have [advocated](#) for robust civil society participation at the Summit given the importance of nongovernmental actors in advocating for democracy in all countries.

Outlook

Whether Summit participants will be able to translate rhetoric into actions that help address some of the broad challenges facing democracy around the world remains to be seen. Many [analysts](#) have [emphasized](#)

that actionable goals and sustained follow-up will be necessary if the Summit is to achieve genuine impacts. This could include mechanisms for encouraging accountability regarding the implementation of Summit commitments in the intervening period between the first and a second Summit meeting and beyond. Related major questions include what new international initiatives or groupings may emerge from the Summit meetings; whether and to what extent existing institutions will be leveraged as part of follow-on activities from the meetings; and how [lessons](#) and [challenges](#) with prior democracy-focused initiatives might inform these plans.

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