

Dear Presidential Candidates:

The United States is a country founded on the principles of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, and for decades, support for democracy and human rights around the world has been a central tenet of American foreign policy. While the United States must maintain relations with many autocratic governments abroad, there are excellent reasons why most of our closest allies are democracies.

Free nations are more economically successful, more stable, and more reliable partners for the United States. Democratic societies are less likely to launch aggression and war against their neighbors or their own people. They are also less likely to experience state failure and become breeding grounds for instability and terrorism, as we have seen, for example, in Syria. This means that the advance of democracy serves U.S. interests and contributes to order and peace around the globe.

Over the past four decades, the number of countries that are free and democratic has more than doubled. From Latin America and Central Europe to East Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, people have opted for accountable government. This remarkable progress is rooted in the universal longing for liberty and dignity – but it is also due to America’s strong support for human rights and democracy, under administrations of both parties. This support has been not only a means of expressing the values upon which our nation was founded, but also a pragmatic choice to promote the governing system that advances security, provides stable markets, and protects human rights. *We write to urge you to embrace this cause and to make it a central part of your foreign policy platform.*

In recent years, authoritarian regimes such as Russia and China have become more repressive; they see the advance of democracy not only within their borders but in neighboring states as a threat to their monopoly on political power. A regime’s treatment of its own people is often indicative of how it will behave toward its neighbors and beyond. Thus, we should not be surprised that so many of the political, economic and security challenges we face emanate from places like Moscow, Beijing, Pyongyang, Tehran, and Damascus.

Repressive regimes are inherently unstable and must rely on suppressing democratic movements and civil society to stay in power. They also are the source and exporter of massive corruption, a pervasive transnational danger to stable democratic governance throughout the world.

The result is that democracy is under attack. According to Freedom House, freedom around the world has declined every year for the past decade. That heightens the imperative for the United States to work with fellow democracies to reinvigorate support for democratic reformers everywhere.

Supporting freedom around the world does not mean imposing American values or staging military interventions. In non-democratic countries, it means peacefully and creatively aiding local activists who seek democratic reform and look to the United States for moral, political, diplomatic, and sometimes material support. These activists often risk prison, torture, and

death struggling for a more democratic society, and their resilience and courage amid such threats demand our support. Helping them upholds the principles upon which our country was founded.

Supporting democracy involves partnerships between the U.S. government and non-governmental organizations that are struggling to bring freedom to their countries. Often, it means partnering as well with emerging democracies to strengthen their representative and judicial institutions. This requires resources that Congress must continue to provide, and foreign assistance must be linked to positive performance with regard to human rights and the advancement of fundamental freedoms.

It also requires diplomatic backing at the highest levels of the Executive Branch, throughout the different agencies of government, and from the Congress as well. It means meeting with democratic activists from various parts of the world and speaking out on their behalf. Demonstrating solidarity with and support for these brave individuals' efforts to build a better future for their country is the right thing to do. In aiding their struggles for freedom and justice, we also build a more secure world for the United States.

There is no cookie-cutter approach to supporting democracy and human rights, but there are fundamental, universal features we should emphasize: representative institutions, rule of law, accountability, free elections, anti-corruption, free media (including the Internet), vibrant civil society, independent trade unions, property rights, open markets, women's and minority rights, and freedoms of expression, assembly, association, and religion.

Many Americans question why the United States should have to shoulder the burdens of supporting freedom and democracy throughout the world. But a growing number of democracies in Europe and Asia, as well as international organizations, are expending significant resources to lend this kind of assistance. We should continue to build on our partnerships with like-minded organizations and countries, including relatively new democracies that are eager to help others striving for freedom.

Some argue that we can pursue either our democratic ideals or our national security, but not both. This is a false choice. We recognize that we have other interests in the economic, energy, and security realms with other countries and that democracy and human rights cannot be the only items on the foreign policy agenda. But all too often, these issues get shortchanged or dropped entirely in order to smooth bilateral relationships in the short run. The instability that has characterized the Middle East for decades is a direct result of generations of authoritarian repression, the lack of accountable government, and the repression of civil society, not the demands that we witnessed during the Arab Spring of 2011 and since for dignity and respect for basic human rights. In the longer run, we pay the price in instability and conflict when corrupt, autocratic regimes collapse.

Our request is that you elevate democracy and human rights to a prominent place on your foreign policy agenda. These are challenging times for freedom in many respects, as countries struggle to make democracy work and powerful autocracies brutalize their own citizens while undermining their neighbors. But these autocracies are also vulnerable. Around the world,

ordinary people continue to show their preference for participatory democracy and accountable government. Thus, there is real potential to renew global democratic progress.

For that to happen, the United States must exercise leadership, in league with our democratic allies, to support homegrown efforts to make societies freer and governments more democratic. *We ask you to commit to providing that leadership and to embracing the cause of democracy and human rights if elected president of the United States.*

Thank you,

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