

The Biden Administration's Strategy for Restoring Faith in Democracy at Home and Abroad

ZACHARY LEE AND NICHOLAS MURPHY

In the past year, an unprecedented 73 countries, about 75 percent of the world's population, have witnessed some amount of democratic erosion.¹ This is due to a plethora of reasons (many relate to COVID-19 and many being on recent social phenomena). And when we look at all of the things that lead to where we are today, the year 2005 deserves the spotlight. Since that year, there's been a steady in erosion of democracy across the globe.

This past year, we've seen at least 40 governments around the world take advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to further concentrate their executive power. Many countries endure different struggles because of the pandemic, both economic and social. According to Carnegie Mellon University Assistant Teaching Professor Ignacio Arana,

An important relatively recent global phenomenon has been the rise of populist authoritarians, who can be left-leaning or right-leaning. Left-wing populist authoritarians thrive when there is income inequality and poverty that they can exploit to gain support. Right-wing populist authoritarians grow when there are ethnic and cultural tensions, especially against immigrants and minorities. That is what has happened in the US and in Western European countries in the last years.²

However, it is important to note that modern history has seen multiple waves of democratization and autocratization. Because these trends follow historical patterns, we do not believe that there is cause for concern. We predict that as time goes on, there will continue to be more waves, but overall, the number of democracies will continue to expand. And yet, there has also been some erosion of democratic institutions in the United States, with some blaming the Trump administration in particular.³ What does this mean for President Joe Biden's term in office?

The Biden administration has developed a three-pronged strategic proposal in response to the challenge: rebuilding our democracy and democratic coalitions; supporting the US position in the global economy, and actively responding to global threats.

The administration's strategy -- entitled "The Power of America's Example"⁴ -- is based on the idea that our own democracy must be strengthened before democracies across the

1 Repucci, Sarah, and Amy Slipowitz. "Democracy under Siege." *Freedom House*, freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2021/democracy-under-siege.

2 Arana, Ignacio, Nicholas Murphy and Zachary Lee. Personal interview. May 12, 2021.

3 Klaas, Brian, "Opinion: The Five Ways President Trump Has Already Damaged Democracy at Home and Abroad," *Washington Post*, April 1, 2019, www.washingtonpost.com/news/democracy-post/wp/2017/04/28/the-five-ways-president-trump-has-already-damaged-democracy-at-home-and-abroad/.

4 "Build Back Better: Joe Biden's Jobs and Economic Recovery Plan for Working Families," *Joe Biden for President*, August 6, 2020, <https://joebiden.com/build-back-better/>



Zachary Lee is a junior studying Business Administration with a double major in Ethics, History, and Public Policy. He interned with LobbyIt in the spring of 2021 and garnered experience in a variety of fields, including international relations, business development, and legislative research. Outside of coursework, he is involved in a variety of organizations on campus, including Liberty in North Korea, American Marketing Association, and C#.

globe can be supported. It is multifaceted and all three prongs work in tandem to achieve the administration's goals.

To carry out the first prong, President Biden seeks to empower traditionally marginalized groups and promote social equity. This includes reforming our public education system to eliminate racial and economic inequities, altering how the criminal justice system operates, and restoring the Voting Rights Act. These proposed actions would, in theory, free these traditionally marginalized communities from many of the institutional roadblocks that prevent them from achieving the same degree of success as more privileged groups. Once the roadblocks have been removed, these traditionally marginalized groups would be able to fully participate in all aspects of our democracy, allowing our democracy to operate as it ideally should.

In addition to empowering these groups, the plan also includes various institutional safeguards, such as greater transparency requirements for election campaigns, the devotion of greater resources to protect election systems, and the institution of strict anti-corruption policies for all in the administration.

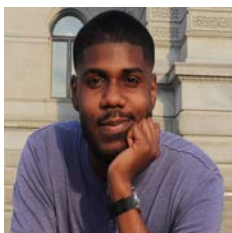
These measures make significant strides in addressing the issues American democracy currently faces, but it is arguable that more needs to be done. For example, Biden's plan includes no measures to tackle the issue of gerrymandering, which many attribute to the source of much of today's electoral inequalities. Biden's strategy does not need to completely cure our democracy, but it cannot afford to let some of the biggest offenders off scot free.

“Our own democracy must be strengthened before democracies across the globe can be supported.”

The second prong of the Biden administration's strategy to reassert American leadership and promote democracy across the globe is to support our country's position in the global economy. The first part of this effort is to support the American middle class. Biden proposes approaching this issue by increasing access to affordable healthcare, raising the minimum wage to \$15, and investing in clean energy to create jobs. Biden specifically addresses the issue of the middle class because of its sheer size; the middle class is, inherently, the largest economic class of Americans. Their vitality is a significant determinant of American competitiveness in the global economy.

The second part of this prong is to support innovation. Our world is constantly changing and it is important to keep up with technological advancements to stay competitive. The Biden strategy focuses on proposed investments in a variety of high-tech concepts such as quantum computing, AI, and 5G. These kinds of investments are necessary to ensure that the United States stays competitive in an economy that is increasingly defined by these kinds of technology.

The final prong of the administration's strategy is to put America in the driver's seat of addressing global issues. This includes renewing and revamping several arms control treaties, working with the rest of the world to tackle climate change, and elevating diplomacy in



Nicholas Murphy, a native of St. Louis, Missouri, is a junior studying *International Relations and Politics* (minoring in *Decision Science and Music*). While in Washington for the CMU/WSP, he interned with the US Department of State - Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. Nicholas also has research experience with non-violent coups/insurgencies and regime transitions.

modern interstate relations. The main idea is to address the administration's concerns that the United States has turned towards isolationism over the past few years. It also contributes to the administration's goal of promoting democracy across the globe.

No plan survives first contact with the enemy, however. Consequently, the administration is facing a number of obstacles that stand to significantly halt its progress. One such obstacle is Congress.

“Biden’s strategy aims to reduce China and Russia’s global influence.”

While President Biden technically has all that he needs to execute his strategy in the legislative branch, his current Congressional margins are slim. And while the executive order can be an effective tool, it often comes with significant political cost; a cost that Biden won't want to pay readily.

In addition to the current the legislative balance of power, it is common for the president's party to experience losses in midterm elections. And with the Democrats already facing such thin margins, it is likely that the administration will find it harder and harder to execute their strategy beyond the Congressional midterm elections scheduled for 2022. To circumvent this issue, the administration needs to either dilute its goals and action items or it needs to strike significant compromises with Republicans.

Another obstacle the Biden administration will face is great power competition. The United States is no longer the sole world power that it was after the fall of the Soviet Union. China and Russia in particular have become military and economic powerhouses to the point that the United States has to address their influence. And unfortunately for the Biden administration, neither of our rivals in this great power competition are particularly open to the idea of democracy. So while internal conflict poses a problem for the administration's domestic plans, pushback from China and Russia prevent the United States from transforming domestic progress into international results.

China and Russia stand to serve as significant obstacles to the administration's plans for a few reasons. Most importantly, Biden's plan actively seeks to restrict their operations. Additionally, Biden is pushing for more comprehensive arms control treaties including the New START Treaty. While Russia does gain something from these treaties, it is unlikely that Russia or China would keep agreeing to measures that keep reducing their self-defense capabilities.

Biden's strategy aims to reduce China and Russia's global influence. If China and Russia allow the Biden administration to spread democracy unchecked, the number of countries they share values with would decrease. Since shared values are a common basis for soft power, China and Russia's influence would decrease in turn. Great power competition requires countries to form alliances and partnerships, and that task becomes harder for China and Russia if Biden's democracy promotion goes unchecked.

From a historical perspective, the world has seen multiple waves of democratization and autocratization. There's considerable consensus that the third and most recent wave of democratization took place in 1974. And as we have experienced an alarming rate democratic erosion around the world, some scholars are beginning to claim that the third wave of authorization started as late as 1993. According to Anna Lührmann and Staffan I. Lindberg, “Democratic breakdowns used to be rather sudden events – for instance military coups – and relatively easy to identify empirically. Now, multi-party regimes slowly become less meaningful in practice making it increasingly difficult to pinpoint the end of democracy.” Democratic erosion has become the new threat to civil societies, making autocratization much

more gradual than what it used to be.⁵ Because of the nature of the new wave autocratization, it can be expected to see more democratic erosion and more democratic breakdown in the near future.

Additionally, there is data showing how democracy promotion has always been on an upwards trend despite the waves of autocratization. Even now, the number of democracies in the world is higher than before. And as there are more waves democratization, it's only natural for a wave of autocratization to follow, and yet another wave of democratization after that. "As more middle classes grow richer in numerous countries, they will demand more political rights and civil liberties from authorities."⁶

Idealistically, it could be possible that there would come a time where autocratization, or at least the correlation between autocracies and human rights abuses, won't exist. Of course, this is a future that's not easy to imagine as there are many obstacles in the way.

A more realistic future would probably look like a world where the waves of democratization and autocratization are much less significant as the world progresses towards an equilibrium -- a world with a fixed balance of democratic and autocratic interests. There will still be conflicts and regime changes, but not nearly as many. While we hope that the idealistic future is tangible, we can't ignore the chaotic nature of international relations and plan accordingly.

5 Lührmann, Anna and Staffan I. Lindberg. "A third wave of autocratization is here: what is new about it?" *Democratization*, 26:7, 1095-1113, DOI: 10.1080/13510347.2019.1582029. Mar. 1 2019

6 Arana, Ignacio. Nicholas Murphy and Zachary Lee. Personal interview. May 12, 2021.

Knowledge is power.
Learn how to use it.

Inform change with a
**Master of Science in
International
Relations and Politics.**

IPS
Carnegie
Mellon
University
Institute
for Politics
and Strategy