

How Biden can restore U.S. credibility at this week's Democracy Summit | Column

The U.S. and China have the dubious distinction of being among the leading world's laggards in the ratification of international human rights treaties.



President Joe Biden has a chance to restore some of the United States' democratic bona fides at this week's summit. [EVAN VUCCI | AP]

When President Joe Biden welcomes more than 100 countries to his “Democracy Summit” this Thursday and Friday, he will most likely refer to America as a global champion of democracy. Yet fewer and fewer people in the world today believe that is true.

A recent Pew Research Center study found that once positive impressions of American democracy have rapidly declined. Only 17 percent of people in surveyed countries called U.S. democracy worth emulating and 23 percent said it had never offered a good example. These perceptions were shaped by our domestic problems including mass shootings, polarization and racial injustice. But fundamentally, the violent riot of Jan. 6 to prevent a peaceful transfer of power, combined with the limitations on voting rights in states across the country, has made it impossible for millions around the world to view the U.S. as a democratic model.



William Felice [UNKNOWN]
Photo: Courtesy]

A true democracy, however, is not defined only by voting rights. A legitimate democratic state also protects the fundamental human rights of all citizens. And here, the Biden administration has made progress.

President Biden has steered the U.S away from Donald Trump's well-documented destructive human rights policies. Under President Trump, migrant children were torn from their parents, white supremacists were empowered, systemic racism in policing was ignored, legal protections for LGBTQ+ people were removed, and hatred against racial, ethnic and religious minorities flourished.

In addition, democracy itself was sabotaged with Trump's refusal to concede defeat and his promotion of the “big lie” that his election was “stolen.” On the global stage, the Trump administration bonded with dictators and autocrats who abused the human rights of their people, resigned from the U.N. Human Rights Council, and withdrew from key international initiatives to defend human rights and promote international justice. As a result, the U.S. moral standing and human rights credibility on the world stage suffered enormously under Trump.

The Biden administration repudiated many of these actions and proclaimed a return to human rights as a central policy guide. Secretary of State Antony Blinken affirmed that human rights were “universal” and “co-equal” with no hierarchy between rights. This was in direct response to the Trump administration's Commission on Unalienable Rights which placed religious freedom as the single most important human right. The impact of prioritizing religious freedom over other rights was to sanction discrimination against the LGBTQ+ communities and others. The Biden administration disbanded this advisory committee and stated that its work “do not represent a guiding document for this administration.”

Under Biden the U.S. regained its seat on the U.N. Human Rights Council, revived its membership in the World Health Organization, re-entered the Paris climate accord and restored funding to key U.N. agencies, including the United Nations Population Fund, a leading supplier of maternal health and family planning services.

In addition, while continuing to disagree with certain International Criminal Court actions, Biden revoked Trump's vindictive executive order authorizing sanctions on top officials of the global criminal court. While reengaging with the world community on human rights, Blinken stated that the first obligation of the U.S. was to protect human rights abuse at home citing the “consequences of systemic racism and economic injustice” in America against people of color, and discrimination and violence against women and girls, religious minorities, people with disabilities, and the LGBTQ+ community.

Yet, for the U.S. to legitimately claim to be a leader in the global fight for democracy and human rights, the administration must do more. The U.S. and China have the dubious distinction of being among the leading world's laggards in the ratification of international human rights treaties. The U.S. continues to refuse to ratify the overall treaties protecting children, women, migrant workers, people with disabilities, and people victimized by enforced disappearances. This poor ratification record makes the United States appear hypocritical when the government lectures other states, such as Venezuela, Iran, Russia, and Saudi Arabia, on human rights issues.

Biden's democracy summit provides the U.S. with a unique opportunity to strengthen our record on human rights and democracy. The administration should announce at the Summit its intent to end the Senate filibuster in order to push Congress to approve both the “Freedom to Vote Act” and the “John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act.” These two acts would set nationwide standards to protect the right to vote and impede anti-democratic laws passed by state legislatures.

And further, the administration should announce plans to prioritize the ratification of the central human rights treaties, beginning with the legal instruments to protect women's and children's rights. Such actions would align the U.S. with the global efforts to protect human rights and democracy and begin to restore our nation's tarnished reputation in the eyes of the world.

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