

Why We Need a Transatlantic Democracy Agenda

March 11, 2022 By Marie Kwon

According to the Economist's latest [Democracy Index](#) report, France is a "flawed democracy." The public's declining trust in its government and the impact of the health mandates on social cohesion are to blame for the French score this year. The Democracy Index not only shows that the world is experiencing the highest democratic decline since 2010, but it also shows that not even established democracies are spared from this trend. Though France was initially wary of President Joe Biden's Summit for Democracy, the two transatlantic allies need to work together on the question of democracy. After all, both share a common trait: their democracies are under siege.

A Transatlantic Front?

Many sources have compiled data indicating the decline of democracy—[Freedom House](#), the [Democracy Index](#), and the [Global State of Democracy Report](#), to name just a few. And for the fifth consecutive year, according to the [International Democratic Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance](#), the number of countries turning toward authoritarianism exceeds the number of those turning toward democracy. Moreover, EU member states are experiencing increasing democratic vulnerability, as seen in GMF's [2021 Transatlantic Trends report](#), which finds that 30 percent of Poles, more than one out of four Italians, and roughly one out of five Spanish, French, and US respondents consider their democracy to be in danger. It is evident that democracy cannot be taken for granted. To fight this democratic erosion, there is a need for renewed attention on the question of democratic failure on both sides of the Atlantic. The first Summit for Democracy was a breath of fresh air in this discussion, but a few shortcomings need to be addressed for it to succeed in 2022.

Room for Improvement

With the January 6 Capitol riots, the simultaneous decline of democracy, and the rise of autocratization unfolding around the globe, it seemed more urgent than ever to hold an event focusing solely on the state of democracy. The first Summit for Democracy, organized by President Joe Biden, took place in December 2021 and kicked off Biden's Year of Action for democracy, with an in-person follow-up scheduled for the end of 2022. Though the summit was initially designed as a landmark event in Washington, it wound up being virtual. This change of format hindered the wider participation of civil society, grassroots activists, and media presence necessary to make the event a public diplomacy success.

Rebuilding Trust

One core issue of the summit was the skepticism of the event from US allies and partners. Despite the obvious enthusiasm for the US administration's renewed energy for cooperation, European allies, France included, remained wary of the interests behind Biden's crusade on democratic erosion. After the Trump years, trust was at an all-time low, and the first foreign policy steps of the Biden administration, like the withdrawal from Afghanistan and the trilateral AUKUS agreement, did not help restore this trust. In that light, the Summit for Democracy emerged as the great flagship event highlighting the return of the United States to the international stage. However, this approach did not strike a chord, and its determined narrative against autocracies made many of its partners feel uneasy about the summit. Likewise, French officials were unable to lend full support to Biden's initiative due to concerns that the renewed US democratic support was too intertwined with US strategic interests. The next meeting of the summit needs to tone down the posturing to allow for greater transatlantic support.

The Controversial Guestlist Reflects a Lack of Cooperation

The summit guestlist did not help alleviate these doubts. The Biden administration, rather than limiting participation, adopted a big-tent approach to the summit, opening the guestlist to non-democratic countries. The list of invitees, a mix of liberal democracies, backsliding democracies, and authoritarian-leaning regimes, was strongly denounced. Many condemned the United States for compiling the list according to its own foreign policy interests, for pitting countries against each other, and for instrumentalizing the summit in the name of its containment strategy for Russia and China. The strong backlash generated weeks before the event was illustrated by Pakistan's refusal to attend and Hungary's efforts to stop Ursula Von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, from making a speech in the name of the European Union because of Hungary's exclusion.

A Partly Clumsy but Crucial Start

However, the US desire to kickstart the conversation is what makes the summit significant, not the guestlist. And the US attempt to sound the alarm is especially timely today in an era of plummeting democracy scores. Despite the criticisms, democratizing forces, regardless of their disagreements, should aim to uphold the summit's momentum. While the controversial guestlist remains a sore point, Biden's summit has galvanized debates worldwide and brought the state of democracy to the forefront. The visibility generated by the summit has had a global impact, resulting in [91 percent](#) of the attending countries demonstrating a commitment to consolidate their democracies at home. These commitments were further discussed by the public, with summit [hashtags](#) generating tremendous impressions on Twitter. Next time, to truly address democratic erosion, the United States needs to avoid alienating its allies. As the United States entered its Year of Action, the European Union launched an Action Plan on Democracy and Human Rights 2020–2024, which promises "a new geopolitical agenda on human rights and democracy," and its Global Team Europe Democracy initiative. Today, with France holding EU presidency, it is the right time to bring their respective efforts closer together.



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Humility as a Necessity

To succeed in sparking a global democratic renewal, the United States must base the second summit on an inclusive agenda. Only in doing so can the initiative find support on both sides of the Atlantic. As US democracy is in a state of emergency, continued recognition of its own shortcomings and prolonged efforts to address them—such as pressing for the Freedom to Vote: John R Lewis Act—might be the only way to prove its reliability and credibility to its partners. Acknowledging the state of US democracy today is the right starting point to save the summit from itself. The first summit managed to create momentum for global democracy, but it is now up to the United States and its partners, like France, to sustain it. This alone justifies the necessity of a second Summit for Democracy and, hopefully, many more to come. Regardless of the format of the event, neither the United States nor France can afford to fail in their commitment to democratic principles.

For Washington, this commitment is necessary not only to address threats to its own democratic landscape but also to show the reliability of the United States as an ally. Providing a response to this democratic slippage is essential for the health of US alliances with partners across the globe, which the administration will need to rely on to foster the democratic renaissance upheld by President Biden. This need for US leadership is reflected in a claim by Heiko Maas, Germany's former minister for foreign affairs: "Without democracy in the United States, [there is] no democracy in Europe." Washington must remember these words when putting together the guestlist for the second summit.

Next Steps?

To successfully address democratic decline, transatlantic partners must tackle it together. A second Summit for Democracy needs to do better in this respect. Facing increasing pressure on their democracies, the United States and France must rally their efforts to ensure that their actions are better targeted, more visible, and more coherent. Democracy must remain a core element of the transatlantic alliance. For this commitment to inform the alliance in the long term, the work toward democratic resilience should rely on cooperation and humility, even when the alliance faces rockier times.

This article was written following a virtual event at the Summit for Democracy, organized by the German Marshall Fund's Paris office as part of the US Speaker Series, in cooperation with the US embassy in France.



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