



**PERCEPTIONS OF U.S. DEMOCRACY PROMOTION
PART TWO: AMERICAN VIEWS**

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PROJECT
on Middle East
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THE PROJECT ON MIDDLE EAST DEMOCRACY is a non-partisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to examining the impact of American policy on political reform and democratization in the Middle East. Through dialogue, policy analysis, and advocacy, we aim to promote understanding of how genuine, authentic democracies can develop in the Middle East and how the U.S. can best support that process.

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Executive Summary

U.S. public opinion on democracy promotion has generally tracked the Bush administration's swing from rhetorically supporting democratic reform in the Middle East after Sept. 11 to bolstering undemocratic "moderates" today. Nevertheless, there are enduring legacies from the post-Sept. 11 democracy promotion consensus: Americans still believe that democracy can work in Muslim countries, and they are receptive to narrow, targeted, non-confrontational policies that indirectly support political reform. This paper concludes that:

- American rhetoric should focus on specific policies that support the development of democracy in the Middle East.
- American efforts to support democracy abroad should be explicitly framed as peaceful and non-military.
- The case must be made to the American public that U.S. isolationism is not an option.

Introduction

After the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, Americans increasingly began to recognize that, in President George W. Bush's words, freedom at home depends on the progress of freedom abroad. Bush was not the first president to declare U.S. support for democracy overseas, but the "Freedom Agenda" he launched was rhetorically more ambitious than any previous framework. He helped to forge a consensus among Americans that one of the main drivers of terrorism against the U.S. was Middle Easterners' frustration with their inability to express their grievances through domestic political processes, leading them to act against America, the closest ally of their repressive governments. The solution, then, was for the U.S. to encourage democratic reform in the Middle East.

The "Freedom Agenda" got off to a rocky start in 2003 after no weapons of mass destruction were discovered in Iraq, forcing the administration to rely upon the removal of Saddam Hussein's repressive regime to justify the war. The agenda's high-water mark came at the American University of Cairo in the summer of 2005, when Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice delivered an inspiring speech renouncing past American support for Middle Eastern dictators and calling on Egypt to lead the way to demo-

cratic reform.¹ The U.S. exerted significant pressure on Egypt after the politically motivated arrest of Ayman Nour, and even directed words of criticism at Saudi Arabia for its arrest of peaceful political demonstrators.

However, the Bush administration's focus on Middle East democracy proved short-lived, as Palestinians elected Hamas in January 2006 and the situation in Iraq deteriorated. By the end of 2006, senior administration officials visiting the Middle East rarely referred to political reform and democracy, except in the context of Iraq. When journalists questioned Rice in Egypt in late 2006 about the change in emphasis, Egypt's foreign minister hung her out to dry by seizing the chance to mention that Rice had not spoken to him about Ayman Nour on that visit.² The embarrassing moment seemed to capture the dramatic American policy reorientation away from supporting democratic reform and towards supporting "moderates," democratic or otherwise.

Since 2006, enthusiasm among the American public for democracy promotion as such has waned. Americans are more skeptical that external support for democracy can be effective, and even those who support democracy promotion are increasingly worried about the election of Islamic funda-

¹"Remarks at the American University in Cairo," June 20, 2005, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2005/48328.htm>.

²"Remarks with Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit After Their Meeting," Oct. 3, 2006, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2006/73525.htm>.

mentalist leaders. Nevertheless, the consensus forged after Sept. 11 has some enduring legacies, including the widespread agreement among Americans that democracy can work in Muslim countries and in the Middle East, and also the recognition that democracy in the Middle East is in America's long-term (though not necessarily short-term) national interest. Not only do the current autocratic regimes foster resentment toward America among their populations, but they are also inherently unstable, based as they are on foundations other than the consent of their citizens.

Analysis of the polling data that follows suggests that Americans actually agree on a wide range of peaceful policies for supporting democracy overseas. They also agree on the unattractiveness of forcible regime change and military intervention. The paper concludes with several recommendations, to the U.S. government and to democracy promotion advocates, of how to most effectively frame the domestic debate about democracy overseas and what types of policies to pursue.

Public Opinion Data Analysis

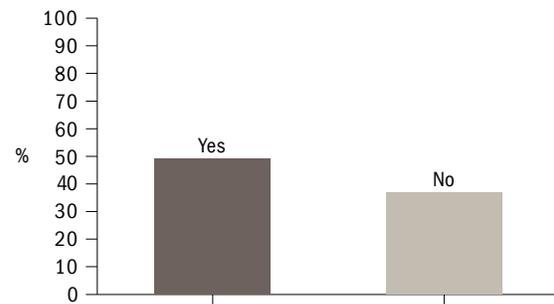
I. Americans believe democracy can work in Muslim countries.

In a Pew Global Attitudes survey in May 2006,³ 49% of Americans said they believe that democracy can work well in most Muslim countries.⁴ See Figure 1. Only 37% said that democracy would not work well in them. It is interesting to note that Middle Easterners are far more optimistic about democracy in their own states than are Americans; in the same survey, 74% of Jordanians and 65% of Egyptians said that democracy could work in their own countries.⁵

Despite widespread discontent with the war in Iraq, most Americans believe the war has not reduced the prospects for democracy in the Middle East. 37% said that

the war had made prospects for democracy in the Middle East “better off;” 33% said prospects were about the same and 26% said they were “worse off.”⁶

Figure 1: Can democracy work well in most Muslim countries?



Source: Pew Global Attitudes Survey, “The Great Divide: How Westerners and Muslims View Each Other.” June 22, 2006.

³Pew Global Attitudes Survey, “The Great Divide: How Westerners and Muslims View Each Other.” June 22, 2006. This 13-nation survey was conducted between March 31 and May 14, 2006. The American portion of the survey was conducted between May 2 and May 14, 2006. The survey is a national probability sample survey conducted by telephone. The sample size was 1001, giving the survey a margin of error of +/- 3% with a 95% confidence interval.

⁴Pew Global Attitudes Survey, question 5: “Now on a different subject, some people feel that democracy is a Western way of doing things that would not work in most Muslim countries – others think that democracy is not just for the West and can work well in most Muslim countries. Which comes closer to your opinion?”

⁵Pew Global Attitudes Survey, question 5c: “Some people in our country feel that democracy is a Western way of doing things that would not work here– others think that democracy is not just for the West and can work well here. Which comes closer to your opinion?” Both the Egyptian and Jordanian portions of the Pew Global Attitudes Survey were conducted from April 5-27, 2006. The surveys were national probability sample surveys conducted by face-to-face interviews. The sample size for each country was 1000, yielding a +/-3% margin of error with a 95% confidence interval.

⁶Gallup / USA Today, June 13, 2006. Poll conducted June 9-11, 2006, with a margin of error of +/-3%. Question: “Do you think each of the following is – better off, about the same, or worse off – as a result of the war with Iraq (rotated)? How about for the prospects for democracy in the Middle East?”

II. Support for democracy promotion as such has eroded since 2006.

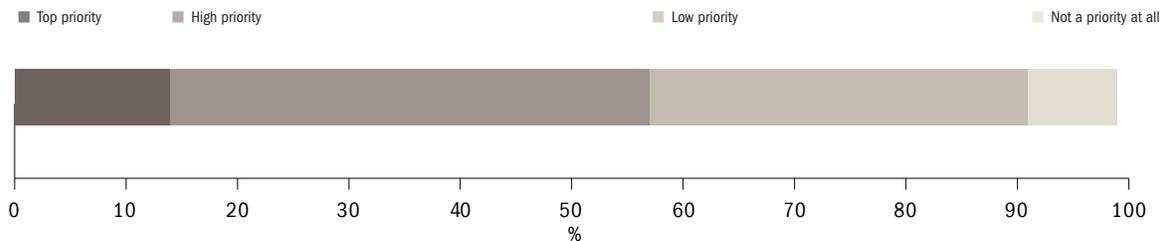
From 2003 to 2005, as President Bush promoted his “Freedom Agenda,” broad agreement formed around the idea that supporting democracy was an important U.S. foreign policy priority. In February 2005, shortly after Pres. George W. Bush’s second inaugural address, 57% of Americans considered U.S. support for the growth of democratic movements in every nation to be either the top foreign policy priority or a high priority.⁷ Only 8% said it should not be a priority at all. See Figure 2. Over half of the respondents agreed that “spreading democracy throughout the world is essential for U.S. security.”

Even through June 2006, 66% of respondents said that most Americans believe

the U.S. should promote democracy around the world.⁸ 45% of respondents also said that more Americans believe in supporting democracy than in the past, compared to 29% who said that fewer Americans believe in supporting democracy than before.⁹

But starting in 2006 and moving into 2007, as Iraq descended into greater chaos and Hamas won a Palestinian Authority election, Americans became markedly less enthusiastic about promoting democracy abroad. In 2005, a majority of Americans endorsed an American role in establishing democracy elsewhere, according to a Transatlantic Trends survey.¹⁰ By 2006, that had declined to 45%; it fell to 37% of Americans in 2007, with 56% of Americans on the other side, saying that it is not America’s role to establish democracy in other countries.¹¹ See Figure 3.

Figure 2: How important is it for the U.S. to support the growth of democratic movements in every nation? (2005)



Source: CNN/Gallup/USA Today, Feb. 8, 2005.

⁷CNN/Gallup/USA Today, Feb. 8, 2005. Poll conducted Feb. 4-6, 2005, with a margin of error of +/-3%. Question: “In his Inauguration speech, George W. Bush said it is the policy of the U.S. to support the growth of democratic movements in every nation. How important a priority do you think this should be for U.S. foreign policy – the top priority, a high priority, a low priority, or not a priority at all?”

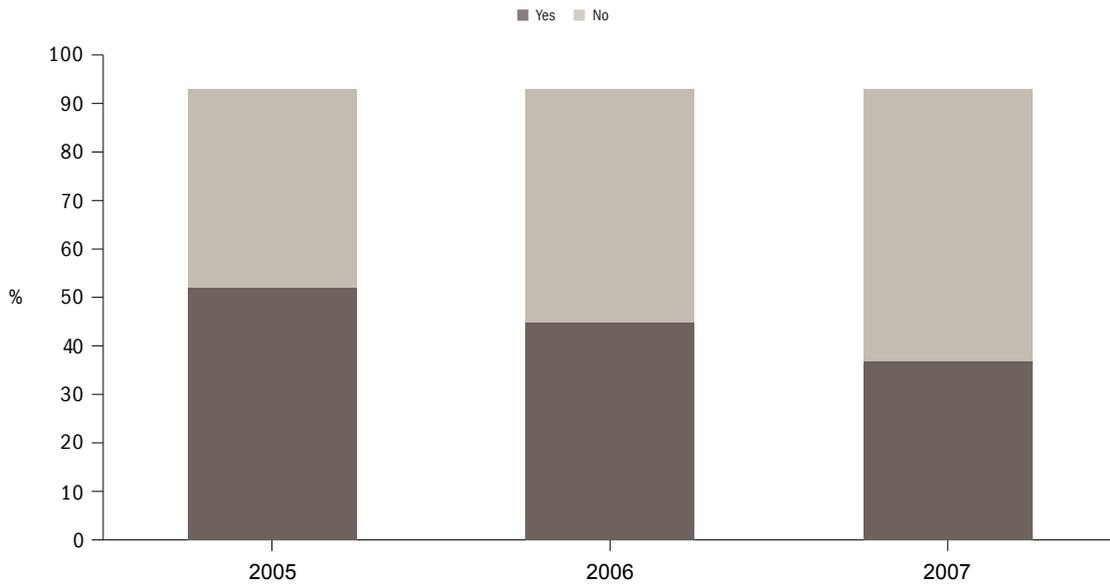
⁸Gallup / USA Today, July 5, 2006, conducted June 23-25, 2006. Question: “Next, I’m going to read you a list of beliefs about what the government should do. For each, please tell me whether you think most Americans believe this, or if you think most Americans do not believe this. How about ‘The U.S. should promote democracy around the world?’”

⁹This rather indirect polling technique is often used to gain a better idea of respondents’ feelings, since people tend to believe that their feelings are shared by most of their peers. Question: “Next, I’m going to read you a list of beliefs Americans might hold about what the government should do. For each, please tell me whether you think more Americans believe this today than did five years ago, if fewer Americans believe this today, or if there has been no change in Americans’ beliefs in the past five years. How about “The U.S. should promote democracy around the world?””

¹⁰The 2005 & 2006 Transatlantic Trends results are included in the 2007 Transatlantic Trends Survey. The 2007 survey was conducted from June 4-23, 2007 in 13 countries. The surveys in each country were national probability sample surveys conducted by telephone. The sample size for each country was approximately 1000, yielding a +/-3% margin of error with a 95% confidence interval.

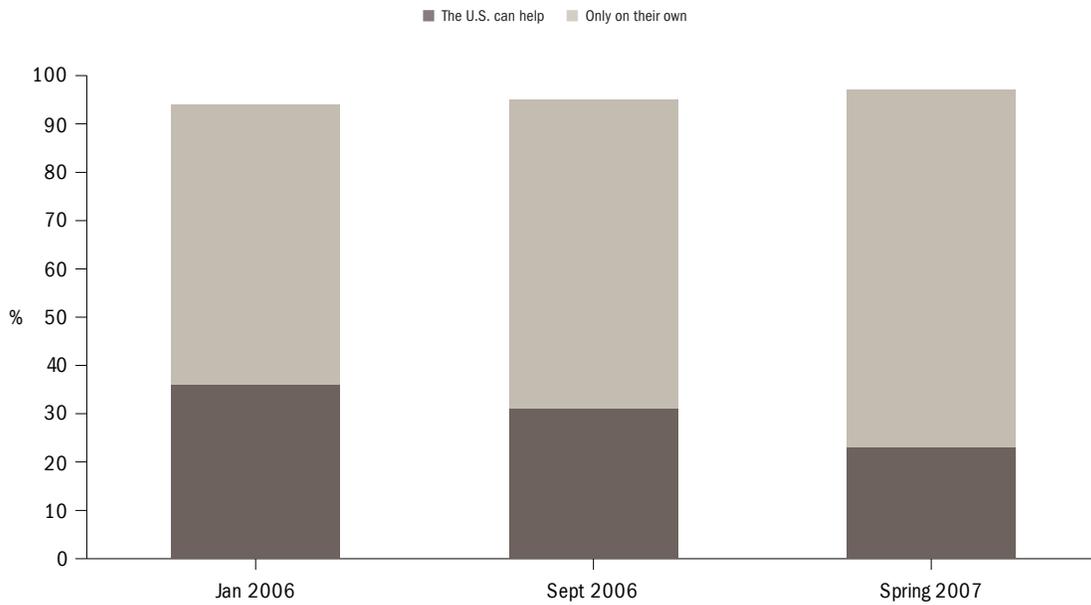
¹¹Transatlantic Trends, question 21b: “Do you think it should or should not be the role of the United States to help establish democracy in other countries?”

Figure 3: Is it the Role of the U.S. to Help Establish Democracy in Other Countries?



Source: Transatlantic Trends 2007.

Figure 4: Can the U.S. Effectively Help Other Countries Become Democratic?



Source: Public Agenda and Foreign Policy magazine surveys, April 3, 2007; Oct. 19, 2006; and March 29, 2006.

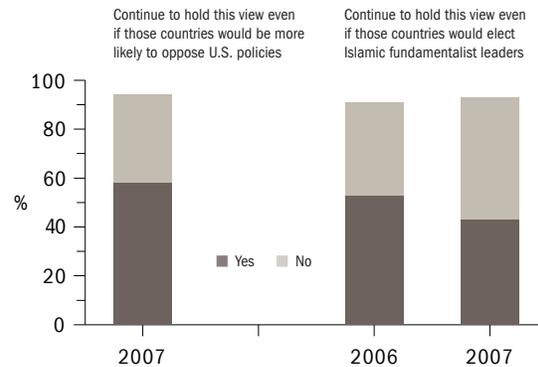
The decline in support for democracy promotion was mirrored in another poll, in which 70% of Americans in 2002 agreed that “The U.S. should be promoting democracy around the world,” which declined in 2006 to 60%.¹² Yet another poll showed a dramatic decline in support for American promotion of democracy: the percentage of Americans who said that the U.S. can effectively help other countries become democratic dove from 36% in January 2006 to 23% in spring 2007.¹³ See Figure 4.

Europeans, on the other hand, have a far more positive outlook on European Union support for emerging democracies: 66% are in favor of the EU helping to establish democracy elsewhere, while only 26% oppose it.¹⁴

Of Americans who endorse a U.S. role in establishing democracy abroad, 58% said they would continue to hold this view even if those countries would be more likely to oppose American policies as a result.¹⁵ See Figure 5. There has been a dramatic shift, however, on how Americans react to the election of Islamic fundamentalist leaders, almost certainly due to the election of Hamas. In 2006, 53% of Americans who believed the U.S. should help establish democracy abroad

said that the U.S. should do so even if it was likely that the countries would elect Islamic fundamentalist leaders; 38% disagreed.¹⁶ In 2007, however, the responses were reversed; only 43% continued to agree that the U.S. should help establish democracies even if Islamic fundamentalists would be elected, while 50% disagreed.¹⁷

Figure 5: Of Americans who say the U.S. should support democracy in other countries...



Source: Transatlantic Trends 2007.

¹²Pew Global Attitudes Project, “Final 2007 Trends Topline.” June 27, 2007. This time-series data is part of a periodic 47-nation survey conducted from 1999 through 2007. The 2007 survey was conducted from April 23-May 6. The survey had a margin of error of +/- 3% with a 95% confidence interval. The survey was conducted by telephone, with a sample size of 2,026. Question 26: “Tell me which comes closer to describing your views: The U.S. should be promoting democracy around the world OR The U.S. should not be promoting democracy around the world?”

¹³Public Agenda and Foreign Policy magazine surveys, April 3, 2007 (conducted Feb. 21 through March 3, 2007, with margin of error of +/-3%); Oct. 19, 2006 (conducted Sept. 5-18, 2006 with margin of error of +/-5%); and March 29, 2006 (conducted Jan. 10-22, 2006 with margin of error of +/-4%). Question: “Do you think the U.S. can effectively help other countries become democratic, or is democracy something that countries only come to on their own when they’re ready for it?” Choices: 1) The U.S. can help other countries become democracies; 2) democracy is something that countries only come to on their own.

¹⁴Transatlantic Trends 2007, question 21a: “Do you think it should or should not be the role of the European Union to help establish democracy in other countries?” The response is for the EU-12 category.

¹⁵Transatlantic Trends 2007, question 22: “And would you continue to hold this view if these countries would be more likely to oppose United States policies?” The “yes” answer aggregates the responses for “yes definitely” and “yes probably;” the “no” answer aggregates the responses for “no probably not” and “no definitely not.”

¹⁶Transatlantic Trends 2006, question 25: “And would you continue to hold this view even if it was likely that these countries would elect Islamic fundamentalist leaders?” The “yes” answer aggregates the responses for “yes definitely” and “yes probably;” the “no” answer aggregates the responses for “no probably not” and “no definitely not.”

¹⁷Transatlantic Trends 2007, question 23: “And would you continue to hold this view even if it was likely that these countries would elect Islamic fundamentalist leaders?” The “yes” answer aggregates the responses for “yes definitely” and “yes probably;” the “no” answer aggregates the responses for “no probably not” and “no definitely not.”

III. Americans are more supportive of a range of specific, narrow policies that indirectly promote political reform.

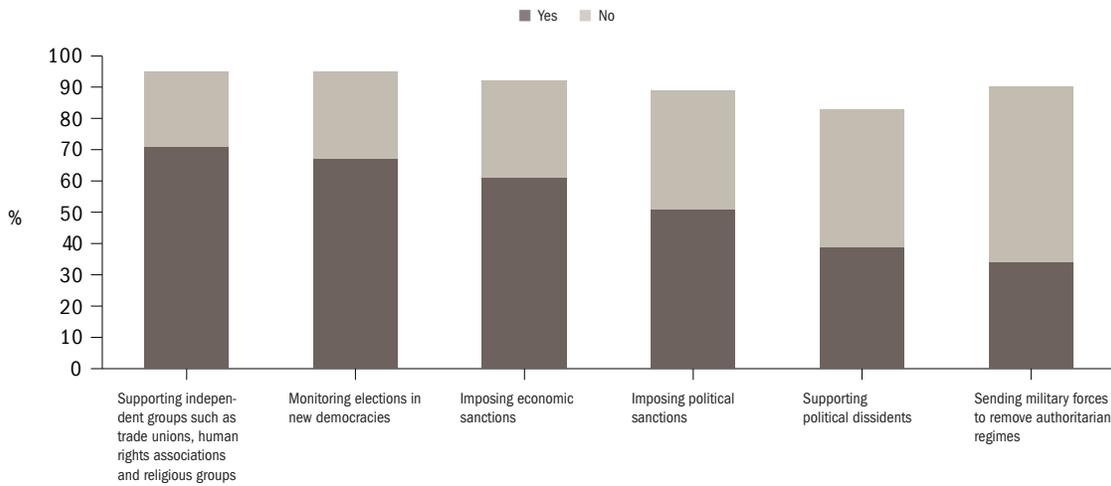
Though the trend away from enthusiasm for democracy promotion since 2006 is perceptible, there are several factors that significantly affect Americans' attitudes about democracy promotion. When questions feature relatively soft and non-confrontational language – “supporting the growth of democratic movements” and “building democracy in other countries” – Americans are more likely to respond positively. But when imagery of intervention and forceful regime change is used, Americans react negatively. For example, a Zogby poll conducted in October 2005 – when enthusiasm for democracy promotion had not yet begun to wane – found that “going into countries and establishing democracies” was not a popular idea.¹⁸ Only 19% agreed with it, even if Iraq were to stabilize and become a functioning

democracy. Seventy percent still disagreed with the policy of “going into countries and establishing democracies.”

More specifically, when a choice is posed between regime change and isolationism, a vast majority of Americans endorse isolationism. Sixty-six percent of Americans believe that the U.S. should “stay out of other countries' affairs” rather than “try to change a dictatorship to a democracy where it can.”¹⁹ Only 18% agree that the U.S. should try to change dictatorships to democracies. Eleven percent say that it depends. Though military force was not mentioned in the question, the image of regime change – contrasted to staying out – received a highly negative response.

On the other hand, when the question of helping democracy abroad is put in terms of specific and narrow policies, Americans are much more likely to endorse it. Americans are open to a wide variety of methods of supporting democracy in other countries.

Figure 6: Policies to Help Democracy



Source: Transatlantic Trends 2006.

¹⁸Zogby poll, Oct. 23, 2005 (conducted Oct. 19-21, 2005). 1,001 adults were surveyed for a margin of error of +/-3.2%. Question: “If within the next few years Iraq stabilizes and the country becomes a functioning democracy, do you agree or disagree that the Bush administration or any future administration should continue with or adopt the policy of going into countries and establishing democracies?”

¹⁹CBS News Poll, Dec. 11, 2006 (conducted Dec. 8-10, 2006; margin of error +/-3%). “Question: Should the United States try to change a dictatorship to a democracy where it can, or should the United States stay out of other countries' affairs?”

The Transatlantic Trends 2006 poll showed that over 60% of Americans supported monitoring elections in new democracies (67%), supporting independent groups such as trade unions, human rights associations and religious groups (71%), and imposing economic sanctions (61%).²⁰ A majority (51%) favored imposing political sanctions. On the other hand, a narrow plurality of Americans said that they do not believe the U.S. should support political dissidents. See Figure 6.

Americans are divided on how the government should treat undemocratic Middle Eastern regimes as it attempts to promote democratic systems in Afghanistan and Iraq. In a December 2004 poll, 45% of respondents said that “the United States should continue to support undemocratic regimes in the Arab world, such as Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, even as it is trying to promote democracy in Afghanistan and Iraq.”²¹ Forty percent of the participants disagreed, while the remainder said they did not know or were not sure.

A sizeable majority of Americans

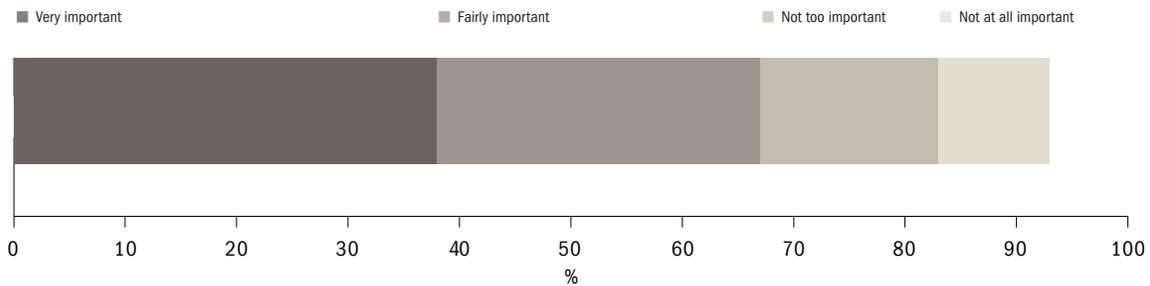
believe that supporting democracy in traditional American autocratic allies is an important way to reduce terrorism in the future. Sixty-seven percent of respondents said that it was either very important or fairly important to “encourage more democracy in Middle East countries like Egypt and Saudi Arabia.”²² See Figure 7.

IV. Americans accept only peaceful means of supporting democracy.

As Figure 6 shows, as of 2006 a majority of Americans did not support sending military forces to remove authoritarian regimes; only 34% of Americans were in favor of the use of military force. This constitutes strong evidence that Americans believe in supporting democracy overseas, but only through peaceful means.

Fifty-eight percent of Americans agreed as of mid-2006 that the Bush administration’s efforts to promote democracy, which the administration has widely identi-

Figure 7: How important is it, as a way to reduce terrorism, to encourage more democracy in Mideast countries like Egypt and Saudi Arabia?



Source: Pew Research Center, Sept. 6, 2006.

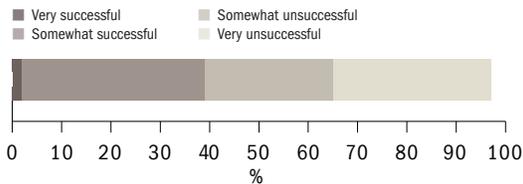
²⁰Transatlantic Trends 2006, questions 26.1-26.6: “Let’s imagine an authoritarian regime in which there is no political or religious freedom. To help democracy, would you support the following actions by the United States?”

²¹Opinion Research Corporation, Jan. 11, 2005 (survey conducted December 2-6, 2004). The poll surveyed 1,608 adults with a margin of error of +/-3%. Question: “Do you believe that the United States should continue to support undemocratic regimes in the Arab world, in such places as Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, even as it is trying to promote democracy in Afghanistan and Iraq?”

²²Pew Research Center, Sept. 6, 2006 (conducted Aug. 9-13, 2006, with a margin of error of +/-3%). Question: “As I read from a list tell me how important each of the following is as a way to reduce terrorism in the future. Encourage more democracy in Mideast countries like Egypt and Saudi Arabia – is this very important, fairly important, not too important, or not at all important as a way to reduce terrorism in the future?”

fied with the war in Iraq, have been unsuccessful.²³ Only 2% believed that the administration's efforts have been very successful. See Figure 8.

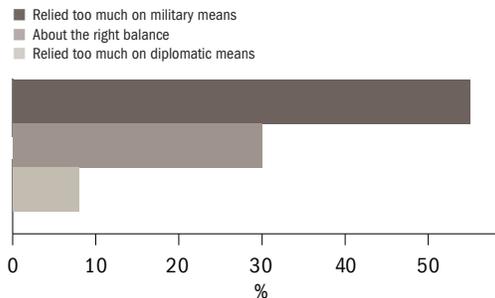
Figure 8: The Bush administration's efforts to promote democracy have been...



Source: NBC / Wall Street Journal, July 28, 2006.

More importantly, more than half (55%) agreed on the reason that such policies have not worked: they have relied too much on military action, and not enough on diplomatic means.²⁴ See Figure 9.

Figure 9: The Bush administration's efforts to promote democracy and freedom have...



Source: NBC / Wall Street Journal, July 28, 2006.

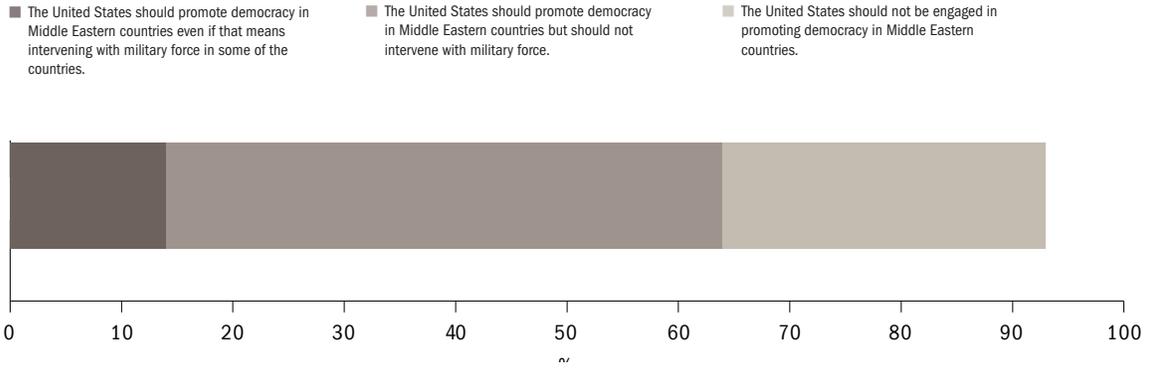
When Americans are given the choice between pursuing democracy through peaceful means, through force, or not at all, Americans staunchly choose the first. In a 2003 Los Angeles Times poll, half of the respondents chose the first option, saying that "the United States should promote democracy in Middle Eastern countries but should not intervene with military force."²⁵ An additional 14% said that "the United States should promote democracy in Middle Eastern countries even if it means intervening with military force in some of the countries." Only 29% said that the U.S. "should not be engaged in promoting democracy in Middle Eastern countries." See Figure 10.

²³Unsuccessful" includes the responses of "somewhat unsuccessful" and "very unsuccessful." NBC / Wall Street Journal, July 28, 2006. Conducted July 21-24, 2006, with a margin of error of +/-3.1%. Question: "One of the Bush administration's objectives has been to promote democracy throughout the world – in general do you think the Bush administration's efforts to promote democracy around the world have been very successful, somewhat successful, somewhat unsuccessful, or very unsuccessful?"

²⁴NBC / Wall Street Journal, July 28, 2006. Conducted July 21-24, 2006, with a margin of error of +/-3.1%. Question: "Do you think that the Bush administration's efforts have relied too much on military action to actively promote democracy and freedom around the world, relied too much on diplomatic means, or has it been about the right balance?"

²⁵Los Angeles Times, Nov. 21, 2003 (conducted Nov. 15-18, 2003). The poll surveyed 1,345 adults for a +/-3% margin of error. Question: "George W. Bush has said that establishing democracy in all Arab and Muslim countries is an important goal for the United States. Which of the following three statements comes closest to your view: "The United States should promote democracy in Middle Eastern countries even if that means intervening with military force in some of the countries," or "The United States should promote democracy in Middle Eastern countries but should not intervene with military force," or "The United States should not be engaged in promoting democracy in Middle Eastern countries?"

Figure 10: Breaking Down “Democracy Promotion”



Source: Los Angeles Times, Nov. 21, 2003.

Conclusions

First, American rhetoric should focus on specific policies that support the development of democracy in the Middle East. The Transatlantic Trends poll shows that most Americans are enthusiastic about supporting democracy through a wide variety of specific activities – monitoring elections, supporting civil society organizations, and imposing political and economic sanctions. But when questions are phrased in general terms, such as “Is it America’s role to establish democracy abroad?”, respondents may associate “democracy” with the invasion of Iraq or with particular unpleasant electoral outcomes. The respondents may not immediately think of the many more narrow ways to support democracy – but when presented with those means as explicit options, Americans enthusiastically support them. Thus, U.S. discourse on promoting political reform should focus on specific policies, rather than overambitious, broad or vague agendas.

Second, American efforts to support democracy abroad should be framed as explicitly peaceful and non-military. Rhetoric about supporting democratic movements abroad and building democracy elicits far more positive responses than does the specter of military intervention and regime change. And as the Transatlantic Trends poll showed, Americans far more frequently accept peaceful democracy promotion activities than they do military intervention.

As with the first recommendation, answers to a general question like “Is it America’s role to establish democracy abroad?” may underestimate the degree of American support for peaceful democracy promotion, because respondents to the vague question are unable to detect whether a “yes” answer is an endorsement of war. Asking specifically whether America should support democracy abroad through peaceful means would draw a far more positive response.

Third, the case must be made to the American public that U.S. isolation is not an option. When presented with the choice between regime change and isolationism, Americans overwhelmingly choose isolationism. Part of this response is certainly due to a repulsion from the idea of regime change, but part of it is due to the attraction of isolationism. Democracy promotion advocates must demonstrate, however, that American isolation from Middle East politics is completely unrealistic. America has far too many interests in the region, including oil, national security, and support for Israel, to possibly contemplate American isolation from the area any time in the foreseeable future. To indulge in the fantasy of isolation is actually extremely dangerous; isolationism in the Middle East is basically code for continuing American support for the undemocratic and unstable status quo.

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