



## A DCI Deliberation Guide

### **The Challenge for Democracy:**

*To what extent should the U.S. and other democratic countries defend and promote democracy around the world?*

### **Format for Deliberation**

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#### **Before the Deliberation**

Read this document (Required)

Reflect on your own views as well as the arguments in the Guide

#### **During the Deliberation**

- I. Setting Expectations - 5 min.
- II. Getting to Know Each Other - 10 min.
- III. Deliberating about Defending Democracy - 15 min
- IV. Deliberating about Promoting Democracy - 15 min
- V. Reflections - 10 min
- VI. Wrapping Up - 5 min

# Background

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## I. Introduction

**What should be the role of democratic countries in promoting democracy and defending democracy around the world?** Should each democratic nation proceed first by paying attention to what is in its own national interest, or should national interest give way to other values such as the protection of human rights? And given that defending democracy generally occurs in the context of military threat and promotion of democracy is generally a peacetime endeavor, to what extent should we separate the problems of promoting and defending democracy? This Deliberation Guide is an attempt to engage with the above questions, and to foster deliberative discussion that makes headway toward answering these practical, ethical, and political questions.

## II. Definitions & Key Examples

Before we can dig into the question above, we should have some common conception of what a democracy is. *Democracy* is a complex and contested concept, but for the purposes of this guide we will understand it to mean *liberal democracy*. Understood broadly, a liberal democracy is a type of state in which citizens have their fundamental rights constitutionally recognized and protected by the institutions of that state. Liberal democracies typically have free and fair elections, competitive elections between different political parties, a balance of powers between the branches of government, and protection of basic liberties of speech, assembly, religion, and property.<sup>1</sup>

What does it mean to **promote** democracy, and what does it mean to **defend** it? Let's take defense first. Defending democracy means *to defend it against a threat to its continued existence in a particular political community*, where this community may be a city, county, state, or country, and so on.

This immediately raises a question: what exactly counts as a threat to democracy's continued existence, and what kinds of defensive actions are justified by each type of threat? This is a big question, and answering it adequately would require a deep dive into just war theory and international law. In this Deliberation Guide, we will proceed instead by considering some paradigm cases in which democracy is defended, as opposed to promoted.

The first example of a situation that may call for the *defense* of democracy is when one state's sovereignty is violated by another state in an attempt to overthrow the existing democratic government and replace it with some form of non-democratic government. This happened, for example, when Nazi Germany invaded France during the Second World War. Many people believe this is also what happened in the case of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February of

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<sup>1</sup> [The Rise of Illiberal Democracy](#). Fareed Zakaria *Foreign Affairs*, Nov/Dec. 1997; [Liberal Democracy](#). Wikipedia. 2023; [Global Issues: Democracy](#). United Nations. 2023.

2022, when Russia escalated the Russo-Ukrainian war that began in 2014 in what appeared to be an attempt to overthrow the existing democratic regime. Both situations are situations where other countries responded in an attempt to defend democracy against a threat. For example, in both instances, other democratic countries which were not immediately threatened by the attack eventually funded and executed military campaigns against the aggressor states.

A second example in which the defense of democracy may be called for is when a democratic nation (or a part of that nation) begins stripping democratic rights away from its own citizens (or away from a particular subset of a population). For example, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was an attempt by the U.S. government to defend the democratic rights of African Americans in the American South at a time when those rights had long been under attack.

There is a third kind of example (and there are many others, but we will limit this guide for reasons of space) where a democratic nation exerts non-military action against another state for infringing against the democratic rights of its own people. Examples of non-military actions include economic, trade, and diplomatic sanctions which are intended to exert various kinds of pressures on the state where democracy is under threat.

Promoting democracy usually does not involve sanctions or defensive activities. Rather, promoting democracy might involve supporting its continued existence in a particular country or attempting to change through various incentives a political community's system into a democratic one.

The U.N. has multiple programs for supporting democracy. The U.N. defines the following 10 items as essential elements of democracy, and focuses its promotional efforts in accordance with them:<sup>2</sup>

- Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms
- Freedom of association
- Freedom of expression and opinion
- Access to power and its exercise in accordance with the rule of law
- The holding of periodic free and fair elections by universal suffrage and by secret ballot as the expression of the will of the people
- A pluralistic system of political parties and organizations
- The separation of powers
- The independence of the judiciary
- Transparency and accountability in public administration
- Free, independent and pluralistic media

The U.S. promotes democracy as well and has a variety of programs designed to proactively address threats to democracy. One example is the Organization of American States (which

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<sup>2</sup> [Global Issues: Democracy](#). United Nations. 2023.

includes all 35 states of the Americas),<sup>3</sup> which agreed to adopt new methods “to preserve representative democracy in the hemisphere” on Sept. 11, 2001.<sup>4</sup> According to the Inter-American Democratic charter signed that day, “The peoples of the Americas have a right to democracy and their governments have an obligation to promote and defend it.”<sup>5</sup> Here is a selection of examples of practical ways that the Organization of American states agreed to promote democracy:

- **Article 5:** The strengthening of political parties and other political organizations is a priority for democracy. Special attention will be paid to the problems associated with the high cost of election campaigns and the establishment of a balanced and transparent system for their financing.
- **Article 8:** Any person or group of persons who consider that their human rights have been violated may present claims or petitions to the inter-American system for the promotion and protection of human rights in accordance with its established procedures.
- **Article 14:** Member states agree to review periodically the actions adopted and carried out by the Organization to promote dialogue, cooperation for integral development, and the fight against poverty in the Hemisphere, and to take the appropriate measures to further these objectives.
- **Article 27:** The objectives of the programs and activities will be to promote good governance, sound administration, democratic values, and the strengthening of political institutions and civil society organizations. Special attention shall be given to the development of programs and activities for the education of children and youth as a means of ensuring the continuance of democratic values, including liberty and social justice.

We can see in the list above that democracy promotion is tied to elections, human rights, poverty, and sound governance and political institutions. Efforts to promote democracy can therefore take many different forms, because different kinds of problems can hamper the democratic functions of a state.

Other international bodies have also coordinated efforts to promote democracy, including the European Union<sup>6</sup> and the African Union.<sup>7</sup>

What does democracy promotion look like more concretely? As one of many examples, USAID focuses on promoting fair and transparent political competition in order to help ensure that citizens have real choice when they are voting, and they leverage monetary assistance to fight

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<sup>3</sup> [Member States](#). Organization of American States. 2023.

<sup>4</sup> [Democracy Promotion and Human Rights](#). U.S. Mission to the Organization of American States. 2023.

<sup>5</sup> [Charter](#). Organization of American States. 2023.

<sup>6</sup> [Promoting Democracy and Observing Elections](#). Fact Sheet on the European Union, European Parliament. 2023.

<sup>7</sup> [The Democratic Governance Roadshow](#). African Union. 2023.

corruption to ensure that policy makers are sensitive to the real needs of citizens.<sup>8</sup> Non-governmental organization (NGO) like the National Endowment for Democracy also give grants to partner organizations across the world in order to foster democratic institutions and values.<sup>9</sup>

The rest of this section is organized into two remaining main sections, the first of which is focused on defense of democracy (Section III) and the second of which is focused on promotion (Section IV). Both sections present arguments for and against these practical stances.

### III. Defending Democracy Abroad

It's fairly straightforward to see why a state ought to defend its own democratic institutions against external and internal threats. Not only are democratic institutions broadly thought to safeguard human rights, but an external attack on a state's political functions also counts as a sovereignty violation, and a state may act in self-defense when this happens.<sup>10</sup> The matter is more complicated when it comes to one democratic state defending democratic institutions in another state (on behalf of the state whose democratic institutions are under threat). Below, this guide presents reasons for and against defending democracy abroad, before it turns to the question of promoting democracy.

Some argue defending democracy abroad can be difficult to justify. This perspective is often informed by historical arguments about how past efforts by the United States and other countries to "defend democracy" have not been successful or have had ulterior motives.<sup>11</sup> The 2003 invasion of Iraq, which was framed as promoting freedom by President George W. Bush, is sometimes cited as an ineffective and insincere example of doing so – that it didn't work and it was really about securing oil resources for Western nations.<sup>12</sup>

Defending democracy can also be a costly endeavor, involving (in the case of military threat) great monetary expense, a risk to the lives of domestic soldiers, and a diversion of governmental resources from domestic matters to matters abroad. For example, Congress approved \$113 billion in overall aid to Ukraine in 2022, including significant military assistance.<sup>13</sup> (While much of that number is determined by military defense costs, some of it is allocated for other purposes. For example, \$26.9 billion is for the *economic* support fund for Ukraine.) If the U.S. were not heavily involved in defending Ukraine, then at least some of the \$113 billion may have been spent differently, such as on reducing national debt<sup>14</sup> or the cost of

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<sup>8</sup> [Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance](#). USAID. 2023; [Anti-Corruption](#). USAID. 2023

<sup>9</sup> [How We Work](#). National Endowment for Democracy. 2023.

<sup>10</sup> *The Ethics of War and Peace: An Introduction*. Helen Frowe. 2016, p. 32.

<sup>11</sup> Walt, Stephen. 2016. [Why is America So Bad at Promoting Democracy in Other Countries?](#) *Foreign Policy*.

<sup>12</sup> Juhasz, Antonia. 2013. [Why the war in Iraq was fought for Big Oil](#). *CNN*.

<sup>13</sup> [Congress Approved \\$113 Billion in Aid to Ukraine in 2022](#). Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget. 2023.

<sup>14</sup> [News Poll Shows Majority of Adults in U.S. Say They are Concerned About Debt Limit, Don't Understand Latest Negotiations](#). PBS News Hour. 2023; [Facts About Americans' Views of Government Spending and the Deficit](#). Pew Research Center. 2023.

healthcare.<sup>15</sup> Americans on both the left and the right side of the political spectrum may have some reason that to worry about the country's spending on the Russo-Ukrainian war.

In the case where soldiers are sent abroad, defending democracy abroad puts the lives of domestic soldiers at risk. One might argue that the lives of domestic soldiers should not be risked unless there is an imminent threat to the country that those soldiers are enlisted to protect. On this kind of view, defending another state's democratic institutions would need to be in the home state's national interest in order for the risk to soldiers' lives to be justified.<sup>16</sup>

There is at least one obvious response to this argument that defending and promoting democracy abroad is hard to justify on the basis that domestic resources should be spent domestically. It is that domestic resources ought to be spent primarily on what is in the interest of the state's citizens, and in some cases it may be that defending democracy abroad is the best way of advancing the interests of one's own citizens while also doing an act of good for another state's citizens. This will not always be the case, but the possible array of results of defending democracy in another state must be carefully considered before we can pass judgment with certainty that a particular instance of defending democracy.

Can the case for defending democracy be strengthened further? One way to do so is to argue that defending democracy abroad is indeed usually in a democratic nation's interest. This may be the case if the states where democracy are under attack or under threat are ally states. Examples of defending democratic countries from invasions by fascist and communist regimes both during World War II and the Cold War era are often cited in this context, as are efforts to build democratic institutions in the aftermath of conflicts (such as in post-war Germany and Japan).<sup>17</sup>

One can also rely on a principle that connects democracy with human rights. Attacks on democratic institutions and rights are usually attacks on human rights.<sup>18</sup> Consider the right to life or the right to equality before the law. These are considered human rights, and some organizations argue that in democratic states they are more likely to be protected, since democratic constitutions tend to take these as fundamental principles.<sup>19</sup> If the institutions that take these principles as their fundamental political building blocks are under threat, then these building blocks—human rights—will likely also come under threat. If indeed democracy is integrally connected to the safeguarding of human rights, then democratic states may have a

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[U.S. Voters Remain Deeply Concerned About the National Debt, as FED Continues Interest Rate Hikes to Combat Inflation](#). Peter G. Peterson Foundation. 2022.

<sup>15</sup> [Americans Sour on U.S. Healthcare Quality](#). Gallup. 2023. See especially the section, "Cost Remains a Pain Point;" [Axios-Ipsos Poll: Costs Top Americans' Health Concerns](#). Axios. 2023.

<sup>16</sup> *Just and Unjust Wars*. Michael Walzer. 1977. See Chapter 5.

<sup>17</sup> Ikenberry, G. John. 2023. [Engage, Contain, Exclude, or Coexist?: How Liberal Democracies Cope with Illiberal Great Powers](#). *Henry A. Kissinger Center for Global Affairs*.

<sup>18</sup> [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#). Stand Up for Human Rights. 2023.

<sup>19</sup> [Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance](#). USAID. 2023. [Global Issues: Democracy](#). United Nations. 2023.

strong reason to promote it. Ultimately, the strength of this reason should be considered against the weight of the countervailing reasons to focus on domestic issues (see above).

#### **IV. Promoting Democracy Abroad**

The line of thought directly above can also be used to argue that democratic nations should promote democracy in non-democratic states, or states where there are some existing democratic institutions but where these are not yet functioning well. For example, a state might allow free and fair elections according to its constitution, but restrictive gender norms and lack of access to transportation can prevent most women from voting. This is a situation in which democracy exists to some extent but democratic rights are not equally protected for all. If democracy defense can be justified on the grounds that it is necessary to safeguard human rights, then democracy promotion can be too.

Democracy promotion is also often framed as being intimately connected to combating poverty, safeguarding human rights, and promoting peace. One might argue that these are some of the strongest reasons democratic nations have to do any kind of international work that might (at least in the short term) take available resources away from their citizens. On this view, states should balance the obligations they have to their citizens against the obligations they have to others, when the human rights of those others are at risk.

Another argument for the promotion of democracy abroad might rely on the idea that democratic nations do have an obligation to defend democracy. But because defending democracy is so costly, and often involves the cost of human life, democratic nations should promote democracy instead. This is an expensive solution, too, but it involves the least threat to human life and safety.

Proponents of both promoting and defending democracy might also argue that doing so is simply the right thing to do, independent of the benefits it might bring to the nations doing this work. As discussed above, democracies are at least in theory designed to protect the rights of people and arguably in ways that other forms of governance do not, and that is an intrinsic good in and of itself that deserves promotion and protection. Proponents also acknowledge the challenges and past failures of efforts to promote democracy but argue that this history does not erase the continued need to do so, merely the necessity to understand that history – which also includes some important successes as well – and pursue better means for doing this still critically important work.<sup>20</sup>

One might criticize the idea of promoting democracy on some of the same grounds presented above in the criticisms against defending democracy abroad. For example, one might argue that it is not in one's own national interest to promote democracy in other countries, and that states should do primarily what is in their own interest. There are models for successful diplomatic and economic relationships between democratic and non-democratic nations, as for instance in the

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<sup>20</sup> Lagon, Mark. 2011. [The Whys and Hows of Democracy](#). *Council on Foreign Relations*.

case of the U.S.-Saudi Arabia relationship; both states are able to act in their own national interest and to collaborate, in spite of the fact that one is a democracy and one is a theocratic regime.<sup>21</sup>

Another reason why one might argue against the promotion of democracy is that many people do not believe that a democratic system would be best for them, or that it would best serve their country. For example, according to the Pew Research Center, only 7% of Russian citizens are committed to democracy, as compared to 52% of Swedes, and only a median 27% of citizens in the Middle East and North Africa are committed to representative democracy.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the citizens in some democratic countries may not support promoting democracy abroad. For example, in 2021, a Pew poll of US adults found that “promoting democracy abroad” was the last priority in a list of 20 top priorities for US foreign policy (20% listed it as a priority), while “protecting the jobs of American workers” was the number one priority (75% of people listed it as a priority).<sup>23</sup>

There are two main arguments here. The first is that democratic nations should not act on principles that are not endorsed by the citizens of the countries where they are seeking to promote democracy. So if democracy is mostly unpopular in a particular place, it is not appropriate for democratic nations to wield their economic and political power in ways that go against the interests of those who live in that place take themselves to have. The second argument begins with the idea that democratic nations should make decisions that reflect to some reasonable extent the opinions of their own citizens. If democracy promotion is not popular among the state’s own citizenry, then the elected officials should not wield their power in a way that fundamentally disregards or cuts against the majority opinion of the citizenry. Both arguments lead to the same conclusion, namely, that promoting democracy is only justified when the relevant citizenry—either domestic or foreign, as the case may be—approves of it.

## **I. Setting Expectations (5 min)**

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In this section, we will review the “Expected Outcomes,” “Deliberative Dispositions,” and “Conversation Agreements” below.

### **Expected Outcomes of the Conversation**

The purpose of this deliberation is to deepen our understanding of the arguments regarding the nature of the promotion and defense of democracy, and how we should change our behavior or regulations in light of the best arguments about this topic. Over the course of the deliberation, we will have the opportunity to listen to the perspectives of our fellow

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<sup>21</sup> [United States-Saudi Arabia Relationship: Eight Decades of Partnership](#). U.S. Department of State. 2023.

<sup>22</sup> [Globally, Broad Support for Representative and Direct Democracy, but Many Also Endorse Nondemocratic Alternatives](#). Pew Research Center. 2017.

<sup>23</sup> [Americans Put Low Priority on Promoting Democracy Abroad](#). Pew Research Center. 2021.



deliberators as well as share our own experiences and beliefs related to this topic. By the end of the conversation, we will have deliberated about the strongest and weakest arguments about our topic. Finally, we will have reflected on our conversation, our areas of agreement and disagreement, and what we have learned from our time together.

### **Deliberative Dispositions**

The DCI has identified several “deliberative dispositions” as critical to the success of deliberative enterprises. When participants adopt these dispositions, they are much more likely to feel their deliberations are meaningful, respectful, and productive. Several of the Conversation Agreements recommended below directly reflect and reinforce these dispositions, which include a *commitment to egalitarianism, openmindedness, empathy, charity, attentiveness, and anticipation*, among others. A full list and description of these dispositions is available at <https://deliberativecitizenship.org/deliberative-dispositions/>.

### **Conversation Agreements**

In entering into this discussion, to the best of our ability, we each agree to:

1. Be authentic and respectful
2. Be an attentive and active listener
3. Be a purposeful and concise speaker
4. Approach fellow deliberators’ stories, experiences, and arguments with curiosity, not hostility
5. Assume the best - and not the worst - about the intentions and values of others, and avoid snap judgments
6. Demonstrate intellectual humility, recognizing that no one has all the answers, by asking questions and making space for others to do the same
7. Critique the idea we disagree with, not the person expressing it, and remember to practice empathy
8. Note areas of both agreement and disagreement
9. Respect the confidentiality of the discussion
10. Avoid speaking in absolutes (e.g., “All people think this,” or “No educated people hold that view”)

## **II. Getting to Know Each Other (10 min)**

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In this section, we will take less than a minute to share our names and 2-3 aspects of our identities that are important to us. These could be our gender pronouns, our occupation, our family status (e.g., husband, mother, etc.), our hometown, our favorite hobby, etc. Please also explain briefly why these aspects of your identity are important to you.

If you are online, while there is no pressure to do so, everyone is welcome to type in any, all, or none of these aspects of your identity into your Zoom nameplate after your name (just right-click on your own image and click “Rename”).

### III. Defending Democracy (15 min)

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Now that we have introduced ourselves, **we will discuss the question of whether democratic states should defend democracy in other countries, and the main arguments for and against such defense.** We will each take up to one minute in turn to address the questions below (without crosstalk) before we engage in open deliberation using the time we have remaining.

**Key Questions:**

1. **What do you think are the most compelling reasons *for* defending democracy abroad and why?**
2. **What do you think are the most compelling reasons *against* defending democracy abroad and why?**

### IV. Promoting Democracy (15 min)

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We will now **discuss the question of whether democratic states should *promote* democracy in other countries, and the main arguments for and against such promotion.** We will each take up to 1 minute in turn to address the questions below (without crosstalk) before we engage in open deliberation using the time we have remaining.

**Key Questions:**

1. **What do you think are the most compelling reasons *for* promoting democracy abroad and why?**
  2. **What do you think are the most compelling reasons *against* promoting democracy abroad and why?**
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## VII. Reflections (10 min)

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While today's conversation is an important step in the journey, figuring out how to understand the reasons democratic nations have to promote or defend democracy abroad, and to what extent they ought to do either, will take time and commitment.

Please reflect on the insights from your discussion with your fellow participants today, and then answer in less than one minute one of the questions below without interruption or crosstalk. After everyone has answered, the group is welcome to continue exploring additional questions as time allows.

1. How has your own position changed? Have you strengthened the views with which you started out, have your views been called into question, or are you in the same place where you started? Why do you think your view has been impacted—or has not been impacted—by our discussion?
  2. What was most meaningful or valuable to you during this deliberation?
  3. Where are the areas of both agreement and disagreement in your group?
  4. Have any new ways to think about this issue occurred to you as we have talked today? Any new ideas that might transcend our current way of conceiving of the problem and its potential solutions?
  5. Was there anything that was said or not said that you think should be addressed with the group? Are there any perspectives missing from this conversation that you feel would be important to hear?
  6. What did you hear that gives you hope for the future of conversations on issues related to the defense and promotion of democracy?
  7. Is there a next step you would like to take based upon the deliberation you just had?
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## About This Guide

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### The Deliberative Citizenship Initiative

The Deliberative Citizenship Initiative (DCI) is dedicated to the creation of opportunities for Davidson students, faculty, staff, alumni, and members of the wider community to productively engage with one another on difficult and contentious issues facing our community and society. The DCI regularly hosts facilitated deliberations on a wide range of topics and organizes training workshops for deliberation facilitators. To learn more about these opportunities, visit [www.deliberativecitizenship.org](http://www.deliberativecitizenship.org).

### DCI Deliberation Guides

The DCI has launched this series of Deliberation Guides as a foundation for such conversations. They provide both important background information on the topics in question and a specific framework for engaging with these topics. The Guides are designed to be informative without being overwhelming and structured without being inflexible. They cover a range of topics and come in a variety of formats but share several common elements, including opportunities to commit to a shared set of Conversation Agreements, learn about diverse perspectives, and reflect together on the conversation and its yield. The DCI encourages conversations based on these guides to be moderated by a trained facilitator. After each conversation, the DCI also suggests that its associated Pathways Guide be distributed to the conversation's participants.

### DCI Pathways Guides

For every Deliberation Guide, the DCI has also developed an associated Pathways Guide, which outlines opportunities for action that participants can consider that are related to the covered topic. These Pathways Guides reinforce the DCI's commitment to an action orientation, a key deliberative disposition. While dialogue and deliberation are themselves important contributors to a healthy democracy, they become even more valuable when they lead to individual or collective action on the key issues facing society. Such action can come in a range of forms and should be broadly understood. It might involve developing a better understanding of a topic, connecting with relevant local or national organizations, generating new approaches to an issue, or deciding to support a particular policy.

If you make use of this guide in a deliberation, please provide attribution to the Deliberative Citizenship Initiative and email [dc@deliberativecitizenship.org](mailto:dc@deliberativecitizenship.org) to tell us about your event. To access more of our growing library of Deliberation Guides, Pathways Guides and other resources, visit [www.deliberativecitizenship.org/readings-and-resources](http://www.deliberativecitizenship.org/readings-and-resources).