

By Congressmen David Price and David Dreier -

This July Fourth, as Americans congregated around their barbecue grills and fireworks displays to celebrate our nation's independence, we sat with six of our House colleagues in the Liberian village of Kakata, listening to a particularly vocal crowd of citizens air its grievances. More money was needed for a local school; a nearby bridge was on the verge of collapse; the government had not done enough for persons with disabilities.

This may sound like a familiar story, but there's a twist: their comments weren't directed at us, but rather at the Liberian legislators who had organized this town hall meeting. Our delegation had been invited to attend not as participants but as observers — as witnesses to Liberia's fragile but maturing democracy, five years after free and fair elections brought an end to one of the bloodiest civil wars in modern history. And like voters the world over, these constituents weren't about to let their elected representatives escape the podium easily.

As a country founded by freed American slaves, Liberia holds a unique place in our own history, but the challenges it faces today as it seeks to rebuild its democracy — a legacy of civil conflict, persistent economic malaise, a lack of essential services, fragile and corruptible state institutions — are by no means unique. From South America to Southeast Asia, countries that long suffered under civil war or authoritarian rule have come to embrace the same basic principles that inspired our forefathers 234 years ago: that governments derive their just powers only from the consent of the governed, and that all men and women should have an equal say in choosing their leaders.

Since 2005, we have had the privilege of leading the House Democracy Partnership, a bipartisan congressional commission that works directly — member to member and staff to staff — with legislatures in such countries to turn principles into practice. Our 14 partners vary widely in their geography and culture, constitutional systems and strategic importance to the United States — from Haiti and Peru to Indonesia and Pakistan — but they are united by a common commitment to building more effective democratic institutions. Our commission does not assume that it can turn dictatorships into democracies, but where democracy has taken root and parliamentarians are seeking to strengthen their institutions, we work to provide technical, material and moral support to those who wish to work with us.

Our recent mission to Liberia and Kenya (our two African partners) coincided not just with our own Independence Day, but also with the 50th anniversary of African independence from colonial rule. These twin celebrations of self-determination led us to reflect on the role of the United States in promoting democratic values and institutions abroad, and we offer three observations based on our experience over the past five years.

First, we reject the notion that democracy promotion is an idealistic pursuit to be carried out only after other, more "realist" interests have been met. It is not just an expression of our national values, but also a tool through which core economic and security interests can be reinforced. Democratic institutions foster stable business environments, promote closer trade relations, and ensure that the benefits of economic development are broadly shared. They also enhance security by providing for civilian oversight of the military and ensuring that a government's security decisions enjoy the support of its people. In short, strong institutions make for better strategic partners than do strongmen. And in the long run, sustainable democratic societies reduce the need for foreign aid from the United States and other countries.

Second, democracy promotion as an element of U.S. foreign policy is in dire need of conceptual clarity. Every president since Woodrow Wilson has made democracy promotion a key goal of his foreign policy, but few have clearly defined what they mean by it. In recent years, the term has come to be overly associated with military intervention and regime change, provoking a backlash against the very idea of the United States "exporting" democracy abroad. As we contemplate the future of democracy promotion, we must draw a distinction between activities designed to strengthen democratic institutions where they already exist and those designed to reform or replace nondemocratic ones. Both may have a place in our foreign policy, but when we conflate the two, we risk undermining both.

Third, we must strike a better balance between long-term efforts to strengthen democratic institutions and short-term responses to the crises of the day. A handful of countries receive the lion's share of democracy and governance funding, while others are left to languish before democracy has fully flourished. We have also tended to focus on one-time transitions to democracy at the expense of efforts to strengthen the institutions that sustain it. This includes legislative institutions, which are frequently overlooked by democracy and governance programs.

These observations are more than academic. The administration is conducting the first-ever Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review, while the House Committee on Foreign Affairs is drafting the first foreign aid reauthorization in a generation. These debates will determine where democracy and governance falls in our foreign-policy agenda for the coming

decades. Moreover, the need for fiscal restraint will require hard decisions about the allocation of our foreign-aid resources, pitting democracy strengthening against more immediate development priorities.

The work of the House Democracy Partnership has demonstrated that after 234 years of independence, legislators around the world are eager to learn from our history. Just as important, it has taught us that our own democracy remains a work in progress. The challenges faced by our colleagues in Liberia and elsewhere differ in degree but not in kind from those we continue to face today: building effective and responsive institutions capable of transcending individual, communal and partisan differences. A clash of ideas is healthy and essential to this process, but so is a determination to seek the common good. In this era of sharp partisan differences, we must not lose sight of this fact.