

**State Should Require Plans to Mitigate Effects of Reported Antidemocratic Actions Overseas**

GAO-26-108754

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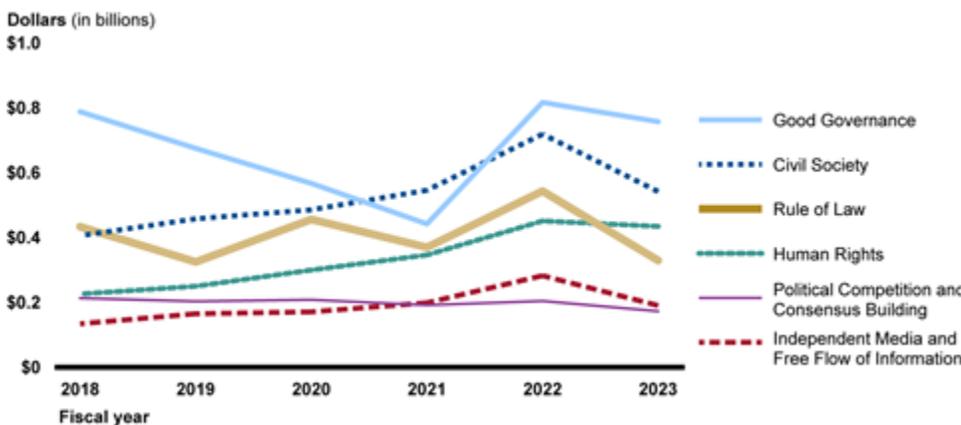
A report to congressional committees

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**What GAO Found**

In fiscal years 2018 through 2023, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) allocated about \$9 billion and the State Department allocated about \$5 billion for democracy assistance overseas. As the figure shows, allocations for the six categories of democracy assistance fluctuated during this period.

**U.S. Democracy Assistance Allocations, Fiscal Years 2018–2023**



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Agency for International Development and Department of State information. | GAO-26-108754

USAID and State officials and representatives of organizations implementing U.S. democracy assistance in four countries GAO selected for its review identified several types of challenges they faced in providing this assistance. These challenges comprised actions by the countries’ governments, such as harassment of civil society and media; aspects of the operating environment in each country, such as weak government capacity; and actions of U.S. and other donors, including competing diplomatic and democracy assistance priorities.

In the four selected countries, USAID and State did not plan to mitigate the risk that democracy assistance programs might have to shift, pause, or cease award activities that benefitted government entities. In fiscal years 2021 through 2024, after reported antidemocratic actions by the governments of some of the four countries, USAID and State paused or ceased assistance involving interaction with government entities and shifted assistance to nongovernmental entities. Agency officials told GAO that redirecting the assistance involved loss of programmatic momentum and confusion about how to proceed. GAO’s review of 12 awards found USAID and State had not developed plans to mitigate this risk. According to agency officials, USAID and State did not require such planning.

A January 2025 executive order paused all U.S. foreign development assistance. In April 2025, State began a reorganization of the department, and in July 2025, the Secretary of State announced that USAID had ceased implementing foreign assistance. For future democracy assistance, establishing a requirement to mitigate the risk of having to redirect it away from host-country government entities would help State ensure that any decisions to pivot assistance are implemented efficiently.

**Why GAO Did This Study**

The quality of democracy has eroded in countries across the globe in recent years, according to organizations that construct and monitor democracy indexes. In fiscal years 2018 through 2023, the U.S. allocated more than \$2 billion annually for assistance to promote democracy overseas.

A 2023 House Appropriations Committee print includes a provision for GAO to assess democracy assistance that USAID and State have provided. This report (1) describes USAID’s and State’s democracy assistance allocations in fiscal years 2018 through 2023, (2) discusses challenges the agencies and partner organizations identified as affecting the provision of this assistance in selected countries, and (3) examines the extent to which the agencies planned to mitigate specific risks in providing this assistance.

GAO analyzed data on democratic erosion and reviewed agency data and documents. GAO also visited El Salvador, Georgia, Sri Lanka, and Tunisia, selected on the basis of data about democratic erosion and U.S. democracy assistance funding. In each country, GAO held discussion groups with agency officials and partner organization representatives.

This is a public version of a sensitive report that GAO issued in September 2025. Information that State deemed sensitive has been omitted.

**What GAO Recommends**

GAO is making two recommendations to State about mitigating risks related to democracy assistance that benefits host-country government entities. State neither agreed nor disagreed with these recommendations.