



Wilton Park



Report

Summit for Democracy – the future: how to sustain international support

Wednesday 7 – Friday 9 February 2024 | WP3355



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In association with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and Westminster Foundation for Democracy.

Summary

At the outset of an unprecedented year of elections and ahead of the third Summit for Democracy (S4D3) in March 2024, this Wilton Park event considered:

- Why democracy matters
- The state of democracy
- Opportunities for democratic renewal
- The value and role of the Summit for Democracy so far
- Possibilities for the way forward

The value of democratic political systems, the reality of democratic backsliding, and the danger of increasing autocratisation are widely acknowledged. Globally, although people are dissatisfied with their governments, there is still widespread desire for democracy. Democratic renewal is urgent .

A revitalised democracy narrative; united, democratic alliances that act quickly; regional action; upholding and enhancing electoral integrity; young people; and patient, politically informed, adaptive international support are all opportunities for democratic renewal. Ultimately, though, democratic renewal will depend on ensuring democracies can address the problems people face and deliver security, development, and shared prosperity.

The Biden Administration's Summit for Democracy initiative provided a forum for focus at a critical time for the international community and catalysed domestic action in a range of countries by enabling leaders, governments, academics, the private sector, and civil society to align on democratic priorities and follow this up with sustained support and action. This made the S4D process a potential "north star" for people working to support democracy. The challenges we face – including those related to digital technology and elections, conflict, and climate change, for example – will impact democracy even further and mean we need closer coordination.

There is clear support for an ongoing forum like the Summit for Democracy but with flexibility on its exact format and frequency. In broad terms, the key elements include an engaging and inspiring leader-level discussion that enables collaboration among democratic actors, learning about effective responses to challenges, and support for initiatives to address those challenges. Activity between leaders' discussions is also critical and needs to be well organised and resourced. This could require establishment of a secretariat.

Introduction

1. In December 2021, against a background of declining levels of democracy across the world, the US hosted the first Summit for Democracy (S4D), a virtual event that brought together over 100 world leaders to focus on challenges and opportunities facing democracies and announce commitments, reforms, and initiatives to defend democracy and human rights at home and abroad.
2. A second, hybrid summit was co-hosted by the US, Costa Rica, the Netherlands, Zambia, and the Republic of Korea in 2023. At S4D2, the gathered world leaders reaffirmed their shared belief that democracy is “humanity’s most enduring means to advance peace, prosperity, equality, sustainable development, and security¹”.
3. Ahead of the third Summit for Democracy (S4D3) hosted by the Republic of Korea in March 2024, this Wilton Park event sought to consider the role and value of the Summit for Democracy and what should come after S4D3.
4. Subject matter experts and engaged stakeholders came together to discuss the challenges to democracy, opportunities for democratic renewal, and to support the development of a clear plan for galvanising multilateral and national efforts to protect and strengthen democracy.

Why democracy matters

5. The ability of human societies to address the increasingly complex challenges we face depends on enabling the personal, economic, political, and social freedoms that are the hallmark of open societies and democratic political systems. Following the wave of democratisation in the past century, evidence and research show that democracies perform better than autocracies on all key measures.
6. On average, democracies have higher growth, higher levels of accountability and justice, lower levels of corruption, more ambitious climate policies, and are less prone to conflict, instability, and atrocities. They have lower infant mortality rates, increased social spending, and better gender equality².
7. In certain cases, autocracies have been able to demonstrate achievements in economic growth and development. But their data may not always be reliable.
8. The societal criticisms of open societies would not be possible in autocracies and the opportunity alone to have this debate is a worthy freedom.
9. In providing the space for creativity and innovation, democracies can unlock another level of development that autocracies will fail to reach. Democracy empowers people to go after their dreams.

The state of democracy

10. Authoritarian regimes are becoming more entrenched and hybrid regimes are finding it hard to democratise.
11. According to V-Dem’s most recent analysis, 72% of the world’s population lives under an autocratic regime³. 2023 was not a good year for democracy by most metrics: the global average score on the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) Democracy Index fell, with 68 countries registering a decline in their score⁴.

¹ [Declaration of the Summit for Democracy - United States Department of State](#)

² [C4DReport_230421.pdf \(v-dem.net\)](#)

³ [V-dem_democracyreport2023_lowres.pdf](#)

⁴ [Democracy Index: conflict and polarisation drive a new low for global democracy - Economist Intelligence Unit \(eiu.com\)](#)

12. The global decline in democracy manifests in several ways, including:
 - An increase in the popularity and number of populist movements across the world, with more and more people turning to nondemocratic alternatives.
 - Increasingly assertive authoritarian actors that are closing civic space and using technology to crush dissent.
 - Demoralisation, disengagement, and growing cynicism among citizens who are not confident that engaging in the democratic process will lead to tangible changes in their circumstances – and declining public trust in institutions.
 - A growing tendency towards polarisation in societies on the basis of identity-based politics which is then used to justify repression of rights.
13. These are symptoms, not the cause, of democratic decline and we must keep asking why the decline is happening. Reasons include:
 - Authoritarians are learning from their experiences, and one another, and putting these lessons into practice.
 - Citizens lack choice and agency: they often cannot see credible alternative leadership, and closed political systems dominated by wealthy elites make people feel they cannot access power and do not have a voice.
 - Uncertainty, insecurity (especially linked on organised crime), and rising levels of conflict across the globe.
 - Resentment towards Western powers and inequalities within the multilateral system.
 - Corruption and the influence of money in politics.
 - Dis- and misinformation.
14. Importantly, people turn to populist and authoritarian leaders because their governments are not delivering, not because they have given up on democracy. The failure of governments in democracies to deliver the security, development and shared prosperity citizens want is a central challenge. Addressing issues like rising insecurity, cost of living, and housing affordability is essential to maintain public trust. Where there is bad pollution in cities, poor child healthcare, and unreliable transport, people will turn to alternative solutions.
15. Together, resentment, apathy and insecurity are hugely damaging to the perception of democracy as a legitimate and effective problem-solving system and provide fuel for the populist fire.
16. But the fact that people are dissatisfied with their governments does not mean they do not want democracy. There is widespread support for and commitment to the principles and values of democracy among people across the world. Democratic reversals are elite led and even autocrats recognise the need to be seen as representing the will of the people and to add a veneer of legitimacy to their rule through electoral victory.
17. There are also many heartening examples of successful democracies and of backsliding being resisted and/or reversed, like in Brazil and Poland.
18. In 2024, more people than ever before will go to the polls, with elections being held in countries home to more than half the world's population. Leaders may be voted in whose commitment to democracy is not strong and a window of opportunity to reverse democratic decline and unleash democratic renewal may close. Action to support and strengthen democracy is urgent.

Opportunities for democratic renewal

A revitalised democracy

19. Talk of democratic decline feeds the authoritarian narrative. The idea of a trade-off between democracy and security is a narrative trap that is being laid by anti-democratic actors. People are being manipulated by mis and disinformation and autocracies manipulate their own information and data, obstruct criticism, and actively misrepresent democracies.
20. While paying due attention to democratic decline and its driving forces, an affirmative narrative that underscores the benefits and value of democracy and is convincing about why democracy is the best system must be part of the way forward.
21. Upholding stories of success will be critical for both current and future generations' belief and commitment to democratic values and the security that democracy offers. Democratic bright spots can be highlighted, showcasing what works.
22. The fact that democracy is a global value, not a Western one, occupies a centrally important part of this narrative. The evidence suggests that demand for democracy and support for democratic values is strong the world over.
23. But the narrative cannot just be empty rhetoric. Democratic governments must actually address the problems that people face and do more to justify trust – inclusion and political participation are key to this. Political trust and perceptions of officials are critical ground in the narrative battle: integrity itself has a powerful influence on citizen attitudes and behaviours.
24. Donor countries should work closely with their partners to better understand their priorities for democratic development and where international support could better support localised agendas.

United, democratic alliances that act quickly

25. Responses to challenges to democracy need to be tailored to the country context, recognising both the primacy of local leadership and the range of challenges, from deepening autocracy through to consolidating democracies. In general, the strategies for responding to democracy challenges need to be broad-based and coherent, sending consistent signals about democratic values and reinforcing the importance of accountability, inclusion, media freedom and the rule of law. Diagnostic tools can support this work.
26. Rapid, united action as soon as the proven symptoms of democratic backsliding emerge can be decisive. When the weakening of the independent judiciary, crackdowns on freedom of the press, closing civic space, or attacks on election management bodies happen, democratic forces inside a particular country need to coordinate and act with a sense of urgency. Delay risks missing windows of opportunity to respond and influence change.
27. While external leverage is limited it can nevertheless be very valuable and states can both use their own individual leverage and engage collectively via multilateral forums.
28. There is a rich menu of actions that can support the quality of democracy over the long-term, including working with independent public-interest media, pro-democracy activists, and democratic institutions. However, it is also worth remembering that elections – even flawed ones – can be critical catalysts for change. Alongside supporting electoral integrity, working before, during and after elections to respond to shifting dynamics in weak democracies is often important.

Regional action

29. Whilst we see trends in the challenges to democracy and democracies around the world, some of the context affecting individual countries can have a regional dynamic. That can be because of ripple effects across neighbouring countries and borders - instability in one nation can impact sociopolitical trends, investment, and growth across a region. Conversely, regional stability and prosperity can also be effective in countering false narratives of democratic failings.
30. Regional dynamics can also arise because of shared or interlinked cultural traditions or political histories – these can improve understanding of the challenges and give neighbouring leaders leverage in responding to events.
31. Regional responses and support mechanisms can also be important. Democracies within a region can coordinate, consider their collective and shared challenges, and build up the necessary architecture to protect and strengthen democracy.

Upholding and enhancing electoral integrity

32. Donors and democratic allies must renew efforts to promote and enhance electoral integrity and the institutions that underpin it. Evidence shows that by upholding elections and unifying democratic purpose we have an opportunity to turn the tide against and reverse autocratisation. Donors and democratic allies must continue to prioritise the unobstructed occurrence of free, fair, and inclusive elections.
33. While there are longstanding mechanisms for election observation, the rapidly evolving capacity to subvert electoral processes through disinformation and other digital tools and to tilt the playing field unfairly in between elections means that a rethink and/or intensified collaboration might be needed.
34. A range of actors have been important in working to build and maintain credibility of electoral processes themselves, with recent examples of brave judicial actions inspiring robust actions by counterparts in other countries, and of election management bodies standing up to political pressure. It is vital to continue to provide support to key electoral institutions, and to consider expanding collaboration with and between judiciaries, who have proven indispensable for resisting and reversing backsliding. This support has to be sustained throughout the pre-election period as reactive post-election strategies alone risk failure.
35. Democracies should consider calling for the introduction of a rapporteur for electoral integrity who can best advise on and support the vital role of electoral management bodies. Other rapporteurs, such as the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, have proven effective in rallying cause and strategic direction which may help to solidify support among democratic allies. A rapporteur could be tasked with advising on responses during specific windows of opportunity in a way that is structured and less ad-hoc.

Young people

36. The limited extent and relatively shallow engagement of many young people in democratic politics is concerning. Demographic profiles in a large part of the world should be putting youth at the centre of work to increase political participation and to deepen understanding of the importance of democratic safeguards. One aspect of the challenge is the changing expectations of young people in relation to democratic institutions that have a relatively slow pace and procedures that are largely rooted in 19th century practices. However, there are opportunities for engagement in wider aspects of political activity and using a range of innovative techniques.

Patient, politically-informed, adaptive international support

37. Democratic renewal must remain an international priority but international support must be context specific and adapt to rapidly evolving risks. The contexts vary between establishing new democracies, consolidating existing democracies, reversing backsliding, and resisting aggressive authoritarians.
38. In all cases, deepening democracy takes perseverance and local leadership. Quick fixes do not exist; it's a long-term commitment. Progress should be valued over perfection, recognising that democracy is a continuous journey that itself requires evolutions to respond to ever-changing societies and challenges.
39. Everywhere, though especially in post-conflict settings, it is critical to work with key drivers of reform in countries that own change and change processes locally. This is important as democratic change can often encounter blunders, so prioritising politically feasible, locally-owned solutions that accept the complexity of working in this area must be the default.
40. Multiple entry points are needed to support democracy effectively. Both purpose-driven public and private engagement are essential. Democracy extends beyond politics into various sectors that are often overlooked – we need to identify and use these entry points across sectors.
41. Disengaging from authoritarian states is not a realistic course of action. However, any costs of engagement must be recognised, articulated, and navigated with purpose or else they risk remaining salient and unchallenged.
42. Development assistance will sometimes be needed in middle-income states that require support to build resilient institutions and respond to threats. For example, transnational terror and security threats are often aimed at countries at this middle-income threshold with limited capacity to prepare and respond to institutional shocks.
43. A whole-of-government approach is needed. The United Nations, NATO, and G7, among other international fora, can provide an avenue for consistent mainstreaming of democratic principles into foreign, security, and trade policy. The fact that the amount of Official Development Assistance (ODA) flowing to autocracies is rising is evidence of incoherence in international efforts to support democratic renewal. New analytical tools that provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of international actors on the democratic development of partner countries are welcome and could increase effectiveness of the international democratic agenda for peace and prosperity.

The value and role of the Summit for Democracy

44. The Biden Administration's Summit for Democracy initiative was the first leader-level discussion focused on democratic renewal in modern times. It provided a forum for focus at a critical time for the international community and catalysed domestic action in a range of countries by enabling governments, academics, the private sector, and civil society to align on democratic priorities and follow this up with sustained support and action.
45. This made the S4D process a potential "north star" for people working to support democracy. The challenges we face – including those related to digital technology and elections, conflict, and climate change, for example – will impact democracy even further and mean we need closer coordination.

A moment to focus on democracy at the highest level

46. In considering what might follow the third S4D, it is clear that a regular, high-level political moment to focus attention on democracy would provide an opportunity to engage leaders and ministers on the challenges to democratic renewal. Leaders build attention and momentum for action on this critical 21st century challenge. A time-bound process, with deadlines and markers acts as a catalyst for getting things done. S4D has been able to generate concrete initiatives to support democracy that are endowed with a certain measure of support.
47. The Democracy Cohorts set up as part of the Summit for Democracy Process, co-led by governments and civil society and comprising governments, civil society, and the private sector, provided opportunities to consider and take concerted action on certain issues. They helped sustain momentum between the Summits and some have continued, helping to build sustainable coordination on aspects of democratic renewal.
48. International summits also play a key role for enabling internal state advocacy among ministries focused on democracy – this role must be recognised as summits can provide an opportunity for global leaders to make commitments to civil society-driven agendas and set the tone for their Ministries to prioritise a focus on democracy across all sectors.

A space to share the democratic playbook and values

49. Like other fora, including the Commonwealth and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), a democracy-focused summit process is valuable as a space to share best practices. It can be a source of ideas, support, inspiration, and solidarity for countries who each have their own individual democratic challenges and opportunities.
50. Autocracies share their playbooks. We know we need more coordination on democracy, and a summit process can be an opportunity to share the democratic playbook and build a sense of community based on shared values.

The way forward

51. There is clear support for an ongoing forum like the Summit for Democracy but with flexibility on its exact format and frequency. In broad terms, the key elements include a leader-level discussion that enables collaboration among democratic actors, learning about effective responses to challenges, and support for initiatives to address those challenges. Activity between leaders' discussions is also critical and needs to be well organised and resourced. This could require establishment of a secretariat.

Converting rhetoric to action

52. While the S4D process generated commitments and catalysed some actions, there will always be limits. A continuing process will be justified if it generates concrete responses to the challenges to democratic renewal.
53. With more time between gatherings, there is more opportunity to use this period for action. More time between events may enable even more work to build in democracy culture and engage domestically with civil society and other stakeholders.
54. This focus on action must be accompanied by clear accountability mechanisms, so progress and commitments can be tracked, whilst avoiding the process being bogged down in bureaucracy.

An engaging and inspiring moment

55. One variant of the S4D model could be a “COP for Democracy”. A “jamboree model” of S4D has potential benefits, including a more wide-ranging agenda and interventions combined with a clear objective. This could chime with the inherent nature of democratic development which requires innovations and cannot be imposed top-down. New, inclusive, and participatory methods could be part of this new model, such as a world consultation or petitions process.
56. This approach could help both in identifying challenges and getting positive stories that would help illustrate democratic values and the value of democracy. Stories from relatively recent democracies such as the Republic of Korea or Spain, with the cultural vibrancy that followed democratisation, are examples of this.
57. Freedom needs cultural messengers as well as institutions, and activists, influencers, and artists that can inspire hope and inspiration.

Open a broad tent

58. In terms of participation in meetings following S4D3, there are merits to a broad tent approach, both in terms of which countries host and participate, and which actors are in the room. A co-hosting model could help signal that democracy is a universal value, with Global South democracies playing a central role. This would provide more opportunities for dialogue and cooperation as well as possible alignment on clarity of purpose and practice. Inviting states who may even be considered to be backsliding or insecure democracies may help to prevent unanticipated resistance and could be achieved by taking a voluntary sign-up to any new commitments.
59. Civil society must take part in multilateral events focused on democracy. Civil society is well placed to set the agenda at international forums. It would be optimal to have high-level government officials present and listening to rather than setting the agenda.
60. The Platform for Engagement of Civil Society (PEC), initiated by S4D3 hosts the Republic of Korea and co-led by International IDEA, the OECD, the Open Government Partnership (OGP), and Community of Democracies (CoD), is a welcome development. Along with co-hosting countries, a civil society co-chair could be considered.
61. Democracies need a variety of institutions and actors to maintain them. The S4D could be strengthened if, for example, judges, parliamentarians, and local leaders are at the table.
62. Finally, young people must be involved in any discussion or dialogue about the future of democracy.

Using existing fora and principles

63. We do not need to reinvent the wheel. There are also opportunities to maximise existing institutions and networks to achieve S4D objectives. The UN, for example, will soon negotiate the Pact for the Future at the Summit for the Future. A democracy support agenda and the principles of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 could be pushed further during the Summit for the Future. However, there is some scepticism about the impact of statements at the UN and a view that the UN is increasingly politicised.
64. Side events, for example, at the UN General Assembly – where world leaders are already gathered – could provide the space for a convening around democracy that involves both governments and other stakeholders.

65. Possible models for the evolution of the S4D include:

- The Halifax International Security Forum model⁵
- The Paris Peace Forum model⁶
- An ASEAN-style model, which has working groups on particular topics but overarching themes for each summit.
- The Bali Democracy Forum
- Regional economic or political communities including democratic renewal themes in their agendas

66. Existing architecture and fora could also take on the evolution of S4D. An infographic outlining some of the existing organisations that focus on democracy and have state participants is included as an annex to this document.

67. The OECD Global Forum is an additional existing entity that could incorporate discussions to follow S4D.

68. The Community of Democracies will celebrate its 25th anniversary in 2025, with plans to mark the occasion with a ministerial meeting. This presents an opportunity for coordination on democracy.

69. The S4D process must take care to avoid duplication – some matters are best covered by existing mechanisms such as Open Government Partnership (OGP) commitments⁷ and the UN Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review process⁸.

70. Moreover, sets of shared principles on democracy already exist, including:

- The 19 principles of the Warsaw Declaration, adopted by 106 states on June 27, 2000⁹
- Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG16): Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions¹⁰
- UN General Assembly Resolution 59/201

Practicalities

71. Several practicalities are essential to the S4D, principally:

- **Funding** – a summit process needs sustainable funding. In addition, if civil society participation is to be taken seriously, organisations and individuals need support in order to be able to participate.
- **Coordination** – a secretariat is likely needed to take the S4D forward, act as a coordination mechanism, help with the task of organising the event, and facilitate summit 'handover'. This could be an existing organisation or group of organisations, with states co-hosting the event

Stephanie Le Lievre and Alex Scales

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⁵ [Mission - Halifax \(halifaxtheforum.org\)](https://halifaxtheforum.org/mission)

⁶ [Missions and values - Paris Peace Forum](https://parispeaceforum.org/missions-values)

⁷ [Commitment \(opengovpartnership.org\)](https://opengovpartnership.org/commitment)

⁸ [Universal Periodic Review | OHCHR](https://www.ohchr.org/en/universal-periodic-review)

⁹ See [Principles of the Warsaw Declaration: Poster Exhibition – CoD \(community-democracies.org\)](https://community-democracies.org/principles-of-the-warsaw-declaration-poster-exhibition)

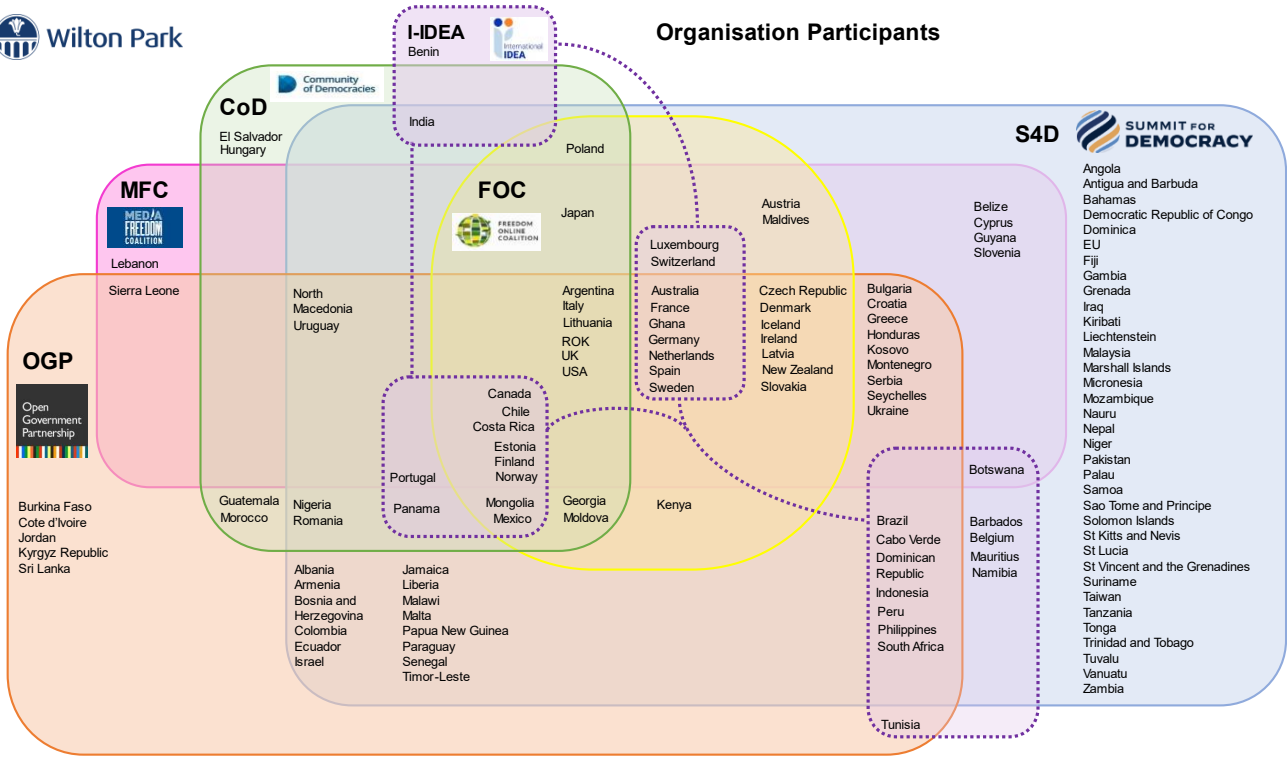
¹⁰ [Goal 16: Peace, justice, and strong institutions - The Global Goals](https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/goal-16-peace-justice-and-strong-institutions/)


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Organisation Participants





Founded: 2011
Participants: 75
Location: Washington

Alliance between governments and civil society to promote transparent, participatory, inclusive and accountable governance

Secretariat: Yes
 Steering Committee with 4-member co-chairmanship (2 government and 2 civil society)

Current lead government Co-chair: Kenya



Founded: 2021
Participants: 118
Location: N/A

Summit of world leaders to spur further action to strengthen democratic resilience

Secretariat: No

1st S4D 2021
 2nd S4D 2023
 3rd S4D 2024

Next Summit Host: Republic of Korea



Founded: 2000
Participants: 30
Location: Warsaw

Intergovernmental coalition to advance common democratic values and support democratic consolidation

Secretariat: Yes

2-year presidency, working alongside Governing Council, Executive Committee and Secretary General.

Current President: Canada




Founded: 2019
Participants: 50
Location: London

Partnership of countries working together to promote media freedom and freedom of expression globally

Secretariat: Yes

Led by rotating Co-chairs, while an Executive Group of ~8 states provide strategic direction

Current Co-chairs: Estonia and the Netherlands



Founded: 2011
Participants: 38
Location: N/A

Partnership of 38 governments working to shape global norms, internet freedom and safeguard human rights online

Secretariat: Yes

Annually rotating Chair supported by a Steering Committee of states.

Current Chair: the Netherlands



Founded: 1995
Participants: 35
Location: Stockholm

Intergovernmental organisation advancing democracy, sustainable development and human rights worldwide

Secretariat: Yes

Annually elected Chair leads the Council of Member States & Steering Committee

Current Chair: Luxembourg