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Democrats' voting rights bill is a big test for Biden's global democracy agenda

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Getting Democrats' voting rights bill passed isn't just important to the Biden administration's democracy agenda at home. It would also underscore a major pillar of the president's foreign policy: strengthening the appeal of democracy worldwide by proving democratic governments can deliver for their people.

The 800-page HR 1 legislation, known as the For the People Act, passed in the House on a near party-line vote in March. Among many other measures, the bill aims to make it easier for Americans to vote in elections, bring more transparency to how candidates are financed, and bolster government ethics provisions.

Democrats say these changes are necessary to counter restrictive voting laws being pushed by Republicans in many states; Republicans see the bill as a sweeping set of reforms designed to help Democrats win in future elections.

It's unclear if HR 1 will pass in its current form, or at all. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer will bring it up for a procedural vote on Tuesday, where lawmakers will decide if the bill should come up for an approve-or-deny vote in the future. Most analysts say the bill won't clear that hurdle, potentially killing HR 1 for good in this Congress.

That would be a serious blow to Biden's domestic agenda. After the House passed the bill in March, the president said its measures were "urgently needed to protect that right [to vote], to safeguard the integrity of our elections, and to repair and strengthen our democracy." Biden even made Vice President Kamala Harris his point person for voting rights.

But on a grander scale, it could potentially harm the core message of Biden's foreign policy. "Biden's global democracy agenda depends on US democracy continuing to strengthen at home," said Heather Hurlburt, a director at the New America think tank in Washington, DC, and

so far the record is “terrible on voting rights and election integrity. So turning those around is important.”

Simply put, Biden’s democratic vision for the world is intricately linked with HR 1’s future in Congress — and at the moment, that vision is in serious jeopardy.

If HR 1 doesn’t pass, Biden could struggle to promote democracy abroad

When speaking about his foreign policy views, Biden often says he sees the world locked in a struggle between democracies and autocracies. He wants to ensure democracies win.

“We have to prove democracy still works. That our government still works — and can deliver for the people,” he said during his first address to Congress back in April. Those who believe American democracy won’t prevail “are wrong, and we have to prove them wrong.”

That’s why many see the passage of HR 1 as vital to Biden’s foreign policy; if it fails in Congress, it’ll be harder for Biden to push for a global democratic movement. After all, it’s awkward for any leader to tell others to push for democratic reforms while democracy dwindles in the country they lead.

HR 1 is “probably the most important piece of legislation in terms of making sure we still have a democracy,” a senior Senate Democratic staffer told me, speaking on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly. “It’s trying to unrig the game.”

But there’s also a risk to Biden’s democracy vision if HR 1 actually makes it through Congress, Hurlburt told me. Republican-led states could slow-walk implementing many of the provisions in the bill. Such defiance might signal to other nations that the president can’t safeguard democracy in his own country, she said, which would be “terrible for all of US foreign policy, including the democracy agenda.”

Some analysts are less convinced that the bill will significantly affect voting rights in the US or American foreign policy writ large, though.

Domestically, critics say the measures were drafted by staffers, not true democratic reform experts, well before the election issues of 2020 became apparent to all. As for the international part, some analysts believe HR 1 won’t be a turning point for America’s global relations.

“Foreign partners will not change their alignments based on the passage of this legislation,” said Justin Logan, a senior fellow at the CATO Institute in Washington. “Just as the contestation in the United States during the civil rights era did not tip the balance of power internationally, neither would restrictions on voting criteria in the states ... affect the concrete realities of international politics.”

Perhaps the bigger question is whether Biden is wise to have put so much stock in the global democracy agenda. While the passage of HR 1 is popular, a March poll from the Pew Research Center showed only 20 percent of US adults and 24 percent of Democrats and Democrat-leaning

independents said promoting democracy in other nations should be a top priority as a long-range foreign policy goal.

Getting HR 1 through Congress might be a worthy idea, but Biden's emphasis on it could be a problem for his global designs. Should it fail, he'll have a steeper climb to prove democracies right.