

## **Remarks by Congressman Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) accepting the 2014 Charles T. Manatt Democracy Award:**

Good evening, and thank you.

I am deeply honored and humbled to receive this award, part of a series bestowed in memory of Charles Manatt – an extraordinary individual who advanced the cause of democracy through his service to our nation and to the world.

Charles was the chair of the Democratic National Committee when I was elected to Congress, and I had the great fortune of working with him over the years on a number of issues affecting my constituents and communities throughout the country. He was an eternal optimist who saw the best in everyone.

That trait was evident when he took on the enormous task of leading the Democratic Party at a time when it had just lost control of the White House and the Senate and had been bitterly divided during the 1980 presidential campaign. Charles galvanized people and energized the party around the principles of fighting for working families and offering sound policies to put the middle class first.

When he passed away in 2011, those of us who knew him lost a dear friend, and our country lost a great patriot who believed strongly that free and open democracy is the surest guarantor of opportunity and prosperity. This is the message that the International Foundation for Electoral Systems has been championing throughout the world.

They have done so by helping election managers across the world expand access to the ballot box, an effort that includes helping make sure people with disabilities can exercise their right to vote as well as run for office. Their efforts combine two important legislative priorities I have had since coming to Congress – ensuring that our election systems work and protecting those with disabilities against discrimination.

I was proud to work for passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990 and later to sponsor the Help America Vote Act in 2002. Both of these laws have helped countless Americans cast ballots in free and fair elections without having to worry about lack of accessibility or voting system irregularities in their polling places.

Sadly, though, there are still communities in this country where this work is unfinished, and I am committed to completing this mission. Even as our nation champions democracy and free, fair, and open elections abroad, we must do more here at home to ensure that all who are eligible to vote are able to exercise that right. A bipartisan bill to restore the protections of the Voting Rights Act that were struck down last year is languishing in Congress – and I will keep fighting to bring it to the Floor.

Around the world, pro-democracy activists are looking to the United States for support, encouragement, and leadership. IFES is providing all three to election officials on every continent to strengthen local democratic institutions and promote greater democratic legitimacy through secure and fair balloting.

One nation in our thoughts tonight, which is struggling with an oppressive regime that has stifled democracy and undermined the free and fair election process is Venezuela. Tonight, Maria Corina Machado could not be with us to receive her award. She is under house arrest.

The regime believes it can silence the democratic ideals she has espoused by keeping her sequestered at home. They are gravely mistaken.

As the leader of the country's opposition party, she represents millions of voices that can never be silenced. We hear them tonight. We hear them echoing through this room. They resonate in the hearts of Americans and others around the world who stand in solidarity with Venezuelans yearning for full democracy. And their

volume will only grow louder and louder as long as IFES's work continues. Not only in Venezuela, but for those yearning to breathe free and determine their own future in every corner of the world.

I thank you again for this award, and it is now my pleasure to welcome outgoing Chairman Peter Kelly – who I have also known for many years – to the stage. But, first, we have a surprise for him.

When Peter was at Georgetown, he sang with the Georgetown Chimes – one of America's most distinguished collegiate a cappella groups. They're here tonight to pay tribute to his work on behalf of IFES and electoral democracy around the world.

Please join me in welcoming the Georgetown Chimes.