

Is AMERICA Still a DEMOCRACY?

A Comparative Assessment of the
Varieties in Democracy Project and
Freedom House Reports



Eric Chenoweth



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eric Chenoweth is director of the Institute for Democracy in Eastern Europe and the principal author of the Shanker Institute's [Democracy Web](#), an online comparative resource for teachers, students and democracy activists. His most recent publication for the Shanker Institute is *What Would Bayard Rustin Do?*

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Is America Still a Democracy?

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How should Americans assess the political state of the country as we approach the 250th anniversary of its founding? Many historians and scholars consider the United States to be moving rapidly in an authoritarian direction during the second presidential term of Donald Trump.¹ Can the U.S. still be considered a democracy? Can it resist the authoritarian temptation?

Two recent reports—one by the **Varieties in Democracy (V-Dem) Project** based in Sweden and the second by the U.S.-based human rights organization **Freedom House**—offer a sobering assessment. Each report is guided by the idea that democracy is more than the conduct of elections but rather encompasses a broad set of principles, institutions, basic rights and behaviors that must be measured together. Each organization has different methodologies, but both judge the U.S. to be among the most rapidly backsliding democracies at a time when the world continues a long slide toward autocracy. A comparison of the reports indicates that from abroad, America’s situation is clearly seen as more dire than a domestic organization may be willing to admit. What both offer are recommendations on a way back. There are indications that a sizable part of the American citizenry has some of those recommendations already in mind.

The V-Dem 2026 Report: A Global Democratic Unraveling

The [V-Dem Project](#), begun in 2011, grew out of the Varieties in Democracy Institute at the University of Gothenburg. Its aim was to go beyond more limited academic models to establish a comprehensive system for measuring democratization over time.

The V-Dem Project identifies five categories of democracy: electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative and egalitarian. The core categories, or principles, are themselves broken down into component parts such as fair election processes, civil liberties, media freedom, judicial independence, executive constraints, and freedom of association, among others. Each component has specific indicators measured by aggregating expert assessments for nearly all countries. Through this methodology, V-Dem built a global data set of democratization and autocratization going back to the adoption of the U.S. Constitution in 1788 and covering most nation-states. Its reports are widely used as policy guides by European governments and for research by scholars.

¹ Among the democracy scholars are Steven Levitsky, Lucan Way and Daniel Ziblatt, who state that the U.S. is today in a state of “competitive authoritarianism” in the journal *Foreign Affairs*, and Ruth Ben-Ghiat in her book *Strongmen* and in various articles, including last year in *American Educator*. There are numerous others.

V-Dem's Democracy 2026 Report is titled *The Unravelling of the Democracy Era*. There is good reason. Its summary finding is that "Democracy is back to 1978 levels for the average global citizen. ... The gains of the Third Wave of democratization, starting in Portugal in 1974, are almost eradicated."

The "Third Wave of democratization" refers to how political scientists identify periods or "waves" in history showing measurable advancement of democracy as a form of government. The wave periods and their number are often contested. Still, the era from 1974 to 2004, often referred to as the "Third Wave," is not disputed. Starting with the popular overthrow of the Salazar regime in Portugal, dictatorship receded and democracy advanced on all continents over a 30-year period. For the first time in history, there were more democracies than autocracies.

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Political scientists similarly point to waves of autocratization. V-Dem and Freedom House date a "third wave of autocratization" to 2005, the first of 20 consecutive years that both organizations have recorded a fall in global democracy measurements. The declines since 2005 are dramatic, found in all four regime types each group categorizes: liberal democracies (with generally free and fair elections, accountability in governance and rule of law); electoral democracies (having much more limited conditions in each); electoral autocracies

(having fully insufficient conditions); and closed autocracies (where a single party, ruling group or individual exercises total control over governance). The V-Dem 2026 Democracy Report now counts—again—more autocracies than democracies. In its estimation, nearly three-quarters of the world population, or 6 billion people, live in autocracies. Fully 28 percent, or 2.3 billion people, live in closed autocracies, a greater percentage than live in liberal and electoral democracies combined.

The V-Dem Project also assesses autocratizing and democratizing trends. In 2025, 44 countries were autocratizing, meaning they declined in democratic measurements over a period of years. Only 18 countries were democratizing. The specific indicators with the largest global drops in measurements in the last year—and over the last two decades—are media freedom, treatment of prisoners, and fair electoral processes.

The V-Dem report does list notable positive examples of democratizing states. One recent case is South Korea, where a president's imposition of martial law in 2024 was quickly thwarted by popular protest and swift impeachment of the president by the legislature and subsequent conviction by the Supreme Court.² Nevertheless, examples of autocratizing

² See the Albert Shanker Institute's webinar "Defending Democracy: The Role of South Korean Labor Unions" for a description of how trade unions played a key part in mobilizing popular protests against the martial law declaration and for establishment of a new government.

trends in both liberal and electoral democracies are more numerous, including most notably the U.S.

American Exceptionalism

The V-Dem Project report puts the U.S. in special focus due to the global significance of its severe drop in scores. The findings are stark:

The scale and speed of autocratization under the [second] Trump administration are unprecedented in modern times. Within one year, the USA's LDI [Liberal Democracy Index] has declined by 24 percent; its world rank dropped from 20th to 51st place out of 179 nations. The level of democracy on the LDI is dwindling to its level in 1965—the year that most regard as the start of a real, modern democracy in the USA.³

Given its size and population, the U.S. score drop is the largest factor driving V-Dem's Liberal Democracy Index downward on a global scale.

The V-Dem Project report describes President Donald Trump asserting executive power on a scale unparalleled in American history and unchecked by a subservient legislative branch under the control of a fully aligned Republican Party. The absence of legislative oversight and investigation were two indicators showing the largest drops in the U.S.'s LDI.

Trump's "undoing constraints in the executive branch" resulted in a similar, if not as steep, score drop. The report cites Trump's "purging [of] perceived opponents, politicizing of the civil service, and removing of oversight of independent agencies and auditors." There were significant declines also in "compliance with the judiciary, compliance with the high court, and high court independence." Trump's attacks on any judicial ruling against administration policies "undermined ... the legitimacy of courts." His pardon of "1,500 criminals convicted for the January 6, 2021, Capitol Hill assault [was a] tacit endorsement of future violence."

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³ Many historians and democracy scholars date the United States as a full or modern democracy to implementation of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. For the first time in American history, conditions were established for full voting rights for African Americans and other minorities that until then were limited or denied outright. Those conditions have again changed to restrict voting rights and elected minority representation as a result of federal and state actions following a number of Supreme Court rulings undermining VRA provisions and their implementation. The recent ruling in *Louisiana vs. Callais* strictly limited implementation of the VRA prompting immediate efforts of Southern state legislatures to remove majority minority districts for the next election.

The V-Dem report has a large section on the administration's "Undoing Civil Rights and Equality Before the Law," citing especially the removal of federal civil rights protections for minorities by executive order. Another section describes "targeting of political enemies" and "bypassing of due process" by the Department of Justice and immigrant enforcement agencies. A third highlights "civil and human rights violations," including the use of military units and federal police against peaceful demonstrators and the extrajudicial killing of civic activists and detained immigrants.

Freedom of expression in the U.S. fell "to its lowest level since the end of World War II" due to government demands for media censorship. There is an additional "chilling of speech" as a result of National Security Presidential Memorandum-7 directing federal prosecution of organizations and individuals having "anti-fascist," "anti-American," "anti-Christian," or "anti-capitalist" views. (There are several prosecutions in different parts of the country based on NSPM-7.)

Altogether, the **V-Dem 2026 Democracy Report** makes clear that assessments by democracy scholars of a United States moving in an authoritarian direction are fully justified by objective measures. Indeed, the report describes the U.S. as "an exceptional autocratizer." It concludes:

Typically, autocratizing states during the 'third wave' have taken a decade to take such a deep dive [in scores]. ... [T]he speed of decline is comparable to some coup d'etats.

The Growing Global Shadow of Autocracy

Freedom House, formed in 1941 to mobilize support in the United States for participation in the war against Nazi Germany, initiated its annual **Freedom in the World Survey** in 1973. For more than 50 years, the survey has been a respected guide evaluating how U.N. member states and territories abide by their commitments under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted by the United Nations in 1948. The survey's initial methodology gave countries a status of Free, Partly Free or Not Free based on a set score measuring 12 categories of fundamental rights in the UDHR. ([Democracy Web](#), the Albert Shanker Institute's civics curricular resource for teachers and students, is based on this original methodology.)

Over time, Freedom House adopted an overall 0-100 scale (100 being the highest score) and added indicators such as gender equality and sexual minority rights. But it maintained the Free, Partly Free and Not Free statuses as a basic yardstick. Like the V-Dem Project, Freedom House highlights the finding of a 20th straight year of decline in global scores in 2025 and a "growing global shadow of autocracy." The **Freedom in the World Survey** saw drops in 54 countries. Only 36 countries registered gains. Overall declines were seen in each of the Free, Partly Free and Not Free categories, but there remained a stronger trend continuing of Partly Free countries moving toward Not Free status and Not Free ones becoming even more repressive.

A Difference in Assessment

Differing from the V-Dem Project, however, Freedom House has a more optimistic judgment that “democracies remain resilient in the face of daunting challenges.” The most striking difference in this regard is the treatment of the United States, which only had a drop of three points in 2025 in the Freedom House survey, a change barely mentioned in its global findings. While the drop is the most significant noted for Free status countries, it hardly matches V-Dem’s 24 percent decline in measurement.

What explains this difference? Until 2016, the U.S. had scored in the low to mid-90s on Freedom House’s 0-100 scale, putting it alongside most major industrialized democracies. In that year, the U.S. score fell to 89 for several generalized reasons: an increase in partisanship; a pattern of discrimination in the justice system; and growing income inequality. During Donald Trump’s first presidential term in 2017-20, there was a significant six-point

decline, with the reasons cited being specific to his administration: lack of government transparency and ethics; executive abuse of power; limited due process for immigrants; a decline in government oversight; and the use of violence to attempt to undo a national election. Oddly, the last indicator did not increase in score with the ultimately peaceful inauguration in 2021 of the freely elected president but it did with the peaceful transfer of power in 2025. Similarly, no other score increased during President Joseph Biden’s administration despite its higher level of transparency and ethics, less abuse of executive power, less legislative dysfunction, and more humane treatment of asylum seekers.

Perhaps, this lack of adjustment in scoring meant evaluators felt they had less leeway to lower Freedom House’s whole number scores further. Whatever the explanation, Freedom House’s scoring for 2025 is hard to square with the V-Dem Project’s report or even the survey’s own [Country Report](#) for the United States. For example, the survey categorizes the national legislature as having been “elected through free and fair elections” (the highest score of 4 on its 0-4 scale). Yet, the next finding is that electoral laws are less than fair due to state-level voting restrictions and partisan gerrymandering (a score of 3). As well, the latter indicator is unchanged despite the report’s description of President Trump directing Republican-led states to engage in irregular mid-decade partisan redistricting to unfairly manipulate the next elections to maintain Republican control of the House of Representatives.⁴

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⁴ In the 2019 case *Rucho v. Common Cause*, the U.S. Supreme Court determined that partisan gerrymandering was non-justiciable since it is not prohibited under the Constitution. The practice exists in some Democratic-controlled states but is much more common in Republican-controlled states giving it a distinct advantage in prior elections for the House of Representatives. For the 2026 mid-term election, the Republican advantage will be significantly higher due to the mid-cycle “gerrymandering wars” directed by President Trump of Republican-controlled states and now accelerated following the Supreme Court’s *Louisiana v. Callais* ruling.

Similarly, the indicator for academic freedom and freedom from political indoctrination is unchanged despite extensive reporting of the government efforts to coerce universities to change their practices and curriculum. The indicator for free media is also unchanged despite the efforts described of the president and government agencies attempting to control media coverage.

Altogether, compared with the V-Dem Project report, there appears to be a hesitance by a U.S. organization to accurately measure threats to the country's democracy posed by the first-year actions and policies of the second Trump administration. Even so, the United States standing in Freedom House rankings remains lower than in previous periods due to its overall drop in scores since 2015. The score of 81 now puts the U.S. tied for 65th, in between Suriname and Ghana.

Is America a Democracy?

So, is America still a democracy? Is it still a free country? The answer of both the V-Dem Project and Freedom House remains yes, but their reports each show American democracy to be highly damaged. In V-Dem's case, there is a dramatic decline from a previous Democratic administration leading to the U.S. being moved from a liberal democracy to the limited electoral democracy category. Freedom House has a smaller decline for 2025 but its ranking and U.S. country report points to American democracy's chronic ill health. The U.S. is now closer to the Partly Free category than to most leading democracies among Free countries.

One additional measure may be considered for where U.S. democracy stands. The *New York Times's* **Autocracy Index** was first published in October 2025 alongside an editorial titled "[Are We Losing Our Democracy.](#)" It aggregates assessments of respected democracy scholars and members of its editorial board on 12 benchmarks. In all 12, President Trump and his administration have moved the U.S. on a scale away from democracy toward autocracy, with the median assessment being a third of the way down the scale.

There have been two updates, the first in [February 2026](#) in response to the violent crackdown against civilians by a large federal immigration force deployed to Minnesota. The second was in early [May 2026](#) after President Trump went to war against Iran without congressional approval. In six benchmarks, the measure is now more than halfway down the scale. These include: bypassing the legislature, persecuting political opponents, declaring false emergencies, vilifying marginalized groups, creating a cult of personality, and using power for personal gain. In the six other benchmarks, institutional and citizens' resistance has limited the movement away from democracy. These are: stifling speech and dissent, defying the courts, using the military at home, controlling information, trying to take over universities and manipulating the law to stay in power. The median is now halfway down the scale.

Can America Stop Its Democratic Backsliding?

As bleak as the 2026 reports of Freedom House and the V-Dem Project are, they each note strong countervailing currents that provide hope for a way back, both from global and American democratic backsliding.

According to the V-Dem Project's report, "roughly 70 percent of 'third wave' episodes of autocratization have been reversed," making what it terms "U-Turns." Among those cited are Bolivia, Brazil, Guatemala, Poland, and the previously noted South Korea. Together, these countries demonstrate that even in less-established democracies, often with recent experiences of dictatorship, societies can and do resist attempted autocratic takeovers through elections, mass protest, independent media, organizing civil society, and holding leaders attempting autocratic breakthroughs to account in the courts.

Specifically pointing to the United States, the V-Dem Project notes that important factors in these U-Turns are "strong institutional safeguards acting as the 'brakes' of autocratization ... and robust societal action serving as the 'engine' of democratic revival." Both are key to taking advantage of the earliest electoral opportunity to thwart an autocratic attempt. While the Freedom House report does not specifically mention the United States, there are relevant global recommendations.

Among others, it calls for democracies to confront corruption and close "financial pathways that sustain authoritarian rule" and to withhold "legitimacy from authoritarian leaders and undemocratic power grabs."

The most recent example of a "U-Turn" is Hungary's election in April 2026 ousting an authoritarian-styled leader. There, the Fidesz party, after gaining power in elections in 2010, had changed the constitution and slanted electoral conditions to maintain a supermajority in parliament in three straight subsequent elections. Over 16 years, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, as Fidesz's unrivaled leader, consolidated party control over the civil service, judiciary, media, public schools and universities, local administrations and parts of the economy. Orbán put Hungary forward as a model for "illiberal democracy," which earned him the endorsements of the current presidents of both Russia and the United States. Notwithstanding such international support, Fidesz lost decisively in the April 2026 elections to a new opposition party led by a former leader, Peter Magyar, who left the government in protest over a corruption scandal. Building on earlier protest movements (including by teachers to defend the public education system) and ongoing resistance of civil society organizations, Magyar unified the opposition around an anti-corruption and anti-authoritarian platform, developed alternative media to reach the public, and campaigned in all parts of Hungary. Voters provided Magyar's Tisza Party a landslide victory and a supermajority in parliament, giving it power to undo Orbán's illiberal regime.

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Hungary's election has proven that even in conditions of "competitive authoritarianism," citizens still can reverse autocratization, bolstering hope for a potential global U-Turn.⁵ But it remains to be seen if the United States can be part of that global U-Turn.

In this regard, the U.S. has shown some advantages. Citizen resistance has been more immediate and robust than in many other autocratic attempts. Hundreds of civil society organizations have mobilized a sustained protest movement around the No Kings Coalition to demonstrate opposition to Trump administration policies and actions. This coalition has held the three largest nationwide protests in U.S. history, most recently on March 28. As well, ongoing community engagement, such as in Los Angeles, Chicago and throughout the state of Minnesota, put a brake on the Trump administration's mass deportation policy and forced a stand-down of deployments of military units and armed and masked immigration enforcement officers.⁶

Institutional safeguards have also shown strength. While some media conglomerates clearly altered coverage of the Trump administration to gain governmental favors,

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independent media as a whole continued to provide critical factual reporting on administration actions as well as on self-dealing by the president, his family, friends and allies. There also have been successful court challenges by trade unions, civic groups, state attorneys general, and class-action suits on an array of executive orders, including those seeking to usurp legislative power, alter

the definition of citizenship, silence dissent, limit legal representation and control education. Overall, the Trump administration has lost up to half of federal cases brought against department policies and executive orders according to a review by the [New York Times](#) (with 400 of 750 total cases still active).

Among the successful federal lawsuits was one involving the American Association of University Professors, the higher education affiliate of the AFT, that challenged administration efforts to withhold government funding as leverage to control university practices and curricula at UCLA. In another, the AFT and other plaintiffs sued to block an Education Department directive to end diversity, equity and inclusion practices in public schools and to alter the teaching of American history and other subjects. In both cases, the

⁵ See, for example, the Albert Shanker Institute webinar, "[The Hungarian Elections and the Future of Hungarian Democracy](#)," featuring two of the country's leading democracy activists.

⁶ The [Crowd Counting Consortium](#), a joint project of Erica Chenoweth at the Harvard Kennedy School and Jeremy Pressman at the University of Connecticut, documented 10,700 protests in 2025, most being organized against Trump administration actions and policies. This is twice the number of protests organized in 2017 in opposition to Trump's first-term actions. In a [Guardian](#) article, Chenoweth, an expert on civic resistance in authoritarian countries, said the level of protest was "historic" in number and size "with diffused protest mobilization all around the country."

administration withdrew its higher court appeals after its orders were ruled illegal by federal district courts.⁷

At present, these and other factors have given the opposition political party's candidates greater possibility to mount serious contests in mid-term elections determining control of both chambers in the bicameral legislature. If the opposition party does gain a majority in one or both chambers, this would re-establish some legislative checks on the executive abuse of power.

In the end, as in Hungary, it will depend on the citizenry to determine if the country will stop, and even reverse, backsliding to ensure that America is still a democracy.

⁷ See UCLA Faculty Association press release "[Trump administration drops appeal of preliminary injunction stopping \\$1.2b fine to UCLA—UCLA Faculty Association](#)," Feb. 26, 2026, and AFT press release "[Major Victory for Public Education as Trump Administration Abandons Appeal](#)," Jan. 21, 2026.

