



# BEYOND POLARIZED NARRATIVES

Unveiling the Comparative Nuances of the State of Democracy  
in the United States



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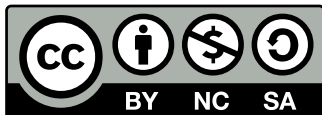
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# Abbreviations

<b>GSoD</b>	Global State of Democracy
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>PACs</b>	Political action committees
<b>PODS</b>	Perceptions of Democracy Survey

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past decade, democracy in the United States has faced significant challenges, experiencing a decline in quality, as indicated by the Global State of Democracy (GSoD) Indices produced by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA). Between 2017 and 2021, the USA was among seven countries to suffer democratic backsliding—a global trend characterized by the severe erosion of democratic institutions and norms that has become more frequent in the past decade. In the USA, this culminated in the unprecedented violent disruption of the 2020 electoral process on 6 January 2021, driven by unfounded claims of electoral fraud that continue to be supported by some political leaders and their followers.

Since then, US democracy has improved and is now back to performing in the high range in the GSoD categories of Representation, Rights, Rule of Law and Participation. However, only Access to Justice and Absence of Corruption have recovered to their pre-2016 levels (or, in the case of Participation, remained stable). Hence, American democracy remains weaker compared with a decade ago and is outperformed by newer democracies such as Costa Rica and Taiwan. The dimensions of US democracy with the lowest GSoD scores include Free Political Parties (low levels of party competition) and Political Equality, with performance well below the average among member states of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), particularly in terms of Social Group Equality (enjoyment of civil liberties and power by minority groups), with scores similar to those of countries such as Benin and Brazil. The USA's Economic Equality score—in decline since 2021—ranks 57th globally, on par with Georgia and Tunisia.

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**Polarization and disinformation have led to a disconnect between expert and public views on the state of US democracy.**

Polarization and disinformation have also led to a disconnect between expert and public views on the state of US democracy. While most experts see many tenets of US democracy as healthy—such as free and fair elections—a large section of the public have lost trust in democratic institutions. This, combined with vulnerabilities such as an out-of-date political structure premised on respect for democratic norms (with the Electoral College, the winner-takes-all electoral system, and political nominations of election administration officials and judges), increases the vulnerability of US democracy. Despite these challenges, citizen participation remains a strength of American democracy (ranking eighth in the world), with high Civic Engagement and record voter turnout in recent elections.

Risks facing the USA ahead of the 2024 elections and beyond include the politicization (actual or perceived) of core democratic institutions such as election administration and the judiciary (at the highest instance), rampant disinformation in a fragmented and polarized media landscape, and the potential risk of political violence. Although these phenomena are observed globally, their severity in the USA, combined with the political system's reliance on democratic norms, makes it particularly vulnerable to democratic backsliding.

Addressing these systemic vulnerabilities is crucial for strengthening the guardrails of American democracy. Potential reforms can be learned from international good practices as well as local innovations—for example, introducing state-level legislation to indirectly reform the Electoral College, fostering practices to reduce representation distortions and enhance electoral competitiveness (such as proportional representation and ranked-choice voting), protecting election administration from political interference by building in non-partisan features, reducing the role of money in politics, introducing measures to foster diverse representation, and prioritizing civic education and media literacy.

The state of US democracy is crucial not only for Americans; it also serves as a global benchmark for democracy, making its health a critical factor to monitor closely.



# INTRODUCTION

During the ‘third wave’ of democratization starting in the mid-1970s, it was widely believed that countries would follow a one-way path towards democratic consolidation. However, developments in the last decade have shown that democracies—even mature ones—can experience democratic backsliding (severe and deliberate democratic erosion within democracies) ([International IDEA 2021a](#)). International IDEA’s 2024 Global State of Democracy (GSoD) Report highlights a persistent global trend of democratic decline, with more countries deteriorating in democratic performance than improving ([International IDEA 2024a](#)). In 2023 almost half (47 per cent) of all countries were declining on at least one factor of democracy, versus only 30 per cent that were advancing ([International IDEA 2024a](#)). The USA, once a model of democratic stability, experienced notable backsliding from 2017 to 2021 ([International IDEA 2021a](#); [International IDEA 2021b](#)), culminating in the 6 January 2021 attack on the US Capitol. Although US democratic performance has improved since then, increasing polarization and the spread of disinformation have led to a concerning disconnect between expert and public views—sharply divided along partisan lines—of the state of American democracy. People’s perceptions of democracy, even when not based on factual evidence, matter to the health of a country’s democracy. This combined with vulnerabilities in the political system presents significant risks for the country’s future democratic stability, making the 2024 elections a critical juncture.

This analysis provides an overview of the state and evolution of American democracy in the last decade based on expert and public opinion data collected by International IDEA on the four key dimensions of democracy—Representation, Rights, Rule of Law and Participation—highlighting strengths and vulnerabilities to watch out

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**Developments in the last decade have shown that democracies—even mature ones—can experience democratic backsliding.**

for ahead of the 2024 elections and beyond. By using International IDEA's global data and analysis, the report will also help readers understand US democracy in a global comparative perspective.

## Chapter 1

# OVERVIEW

According to [International IDEA's GSoD Indices](#), the USA is again, as of 2023, performing in the high range in the four core categories of democratic performance—Representation, Rights, Rule of Law and Participation—after a historically unprecedented dip from 2017, when performance dropped to mid-range on some of the categories.

Between 2016 and 2021, the USA saw significant declines in Representation, Rights and Rule of Law, especially in terms of Credible Elections and Effective Parliament (Representation), Absence of Corruption and Predictable Enforcement (Rule of Law), and Freedom of Expression and Freedom of the Press (Rights).

From 2017 to 2021, this contraction met the criteria to be defined as democratic backsliding, which refers to the erosion of democratic institutions, practices and norms within democracies, often leading to executive overreach and—in the worst case—a gradual shift towards authoritarianism. Scholars vary in their definitions, including the scope and focus of declines, but generally agree that it involves the intentional weakening of checks on government power by a democratically elected government, as evidenced by declines in the rule of law and civil liberties over time ([Choudhry 2018](#); [Carothers and Press 2022](#); [Bermeo 2016](#); [Ginsburg and Huq 2018](#); [Waldner and Lust 2018](#)).

During this period, the USA was one of seven countries in the world suffering democratic backsliding (along with Brazil, El Salvador, Hungary, India, Mauritius, Poland). In 2019, the USA ranked in the top three most severely eroding democracies in the world, accompanied by Brazil and Poland ([International IDEA 2022](#)).

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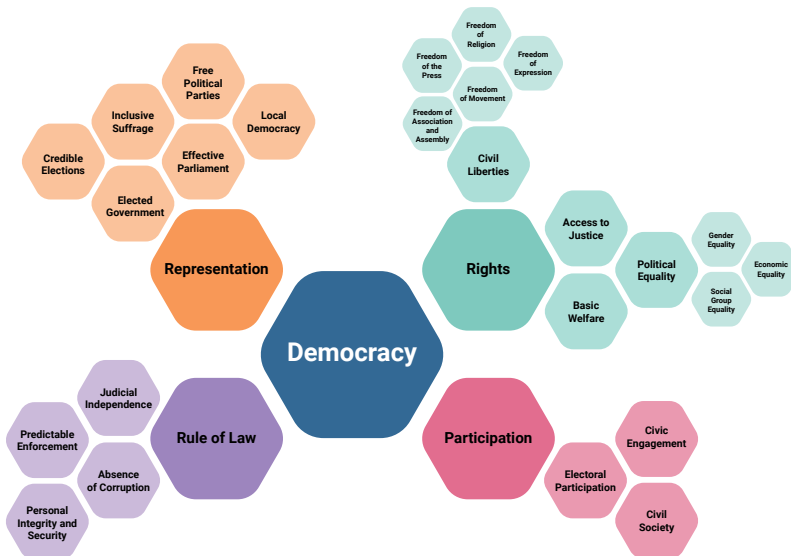
**The USA is again, as of 2023, performing in the high range in the four core categories of democratic performance—Representation, Rights, Rule of Law and Participation.**

### Box 1.1. Global State of Democracy framework

Each section in this report starts with an overview and analysis of the GSoD Indices scores for the United States in a global comparative perspective. The GSoD Indices is a quantitative data set produced by International IDEA, which aggregates data from 24 data sources, including observational data from United Nations agencies, academic expert-coded data and data collected directly by International IDEA. The Indices cover 30 aggregated indicators underpinned by a total of 165 underlying indicators covering 174 countries from 1975 to 2023. The Indices measure national performance across various dimensions of democracy, broadly understood as a system in which there is public control over decision making and decision makers and in which there is equality in the exercise of that control. The Indices are organized through a hierarchical conceptual framework oriented around four core categories of democratic performance: Representation, Rights, Rule of Law and Participation. Below

the four categories are factors (such as Credible Elections or Judicial Independence). Finally, at the lowest level are subfactors (such as Freedom of Expression or Social Group Equality). The scores range from 0 to 1, with a low range below 0.40, a mid-range from 0.40 to 0.70 and a high range above 0.70 ([International IDEA 2024a](#); [International IDEA 2024d](#)). The GSoD data referred to in this Report, unless otherwise stated, are drawn from the Global State of Democracy Indices v8, <<https://www.idea.int/democracytracker/about-the-gsod-indices>>, accessed 10 July 2024.

This report additionally draws on the [Perceptions of Democracy Survey \(PODS\)](#) produced by International IDEA in 2024. The PODS data set includes popular views of the performance of and access to several political institutions, as well as information on people's values and satisfaction with government. The survey covers 19 countries, including the United States ([International IDEA 2024b](#)).



All three countries have since reversed (or are in the process of reversing) their democratic backsliding. For the USA and Brazil (not yet for Poland), this reversal has been reflected in significant improvements to their democratic performance scores. However, while most US democratic performance indicators have seen an improvement since 2021, only Access to Justice and Absence of Corruption have recovered to their pre-2016 levels (while Participation has remained relatively stable at high levels). American democracy therefore remains significantly debilitated compared with a decade ago.

**While most US democratic performance indicators have seen an improvement since 2021, only Access to Justice and Absence of Corruption have recovered to their pre-2016 levels.**

### Box 1.2. Worldwide ranking and GSoD Indices scores of USA in 2023

In 1980 the USA ranked among the top 25 countries in the world in all four democratic performance categories (Representation, Rights, Rule of Law and Participation). In 2019 it was in the top 25 in only one (Participation). This was still the case in 2023, although the ranking positions had somewhat improved. The USA is now outperformed by newer democracies such as Costa Rica and Taiwan (which are now in the top 25 in all four categories). For a full view of country rankings, see [International IDEA 2024a](#), pp. 93–119.

	Representation	Rights	Rule of Law	Participation
Score	0.70	0.72	0.71	0.85
Ranking	46/173	34/173	26/173	8/173

Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices 1975–2023, v. 8, 2024, <<https://www.idea.int/democracytracker/gso-d-indices>>, accessed 12 October 2024.

## Chapter 2

# THE STATE OF US DEMOCRACY

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### 2.1. POLARIZATION

Polarization is on the rise globally, with extreme ‘toxic polarization’ harming democracy by deepening divisions in politics and society (Boese et al. 2022; Somer, McCoy and Luke 2021). These divisions are both ideological, such as differences in policy preferences (Abramowitz 2010), and affective, marked by distrust and animosity between partisan groups (Mason 2018), both of which have increased globally in the past decade. Demographic and economic changes, with resulting cultural and societal shifts, along with algorithm-driven social media, have intensified these divides by creating echo chambers and reinforcing biases, while political elites exacerbate polarization through divisive rhetoric and exclusionary policies (Boese et al. 2022; Dimock and Wike 2020; Mounk 2022; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Carothers and Press 2022). There are concerns that generative artificial intelligence may turbocharge these trends. The V-Dem Institute’s measure of political polarization shows that the world average has increased by 21 per cent since 2000. In the USA this measure has increased more than three times during the same period (75 per cent)<sup>1</sup> (Figure 2.1).

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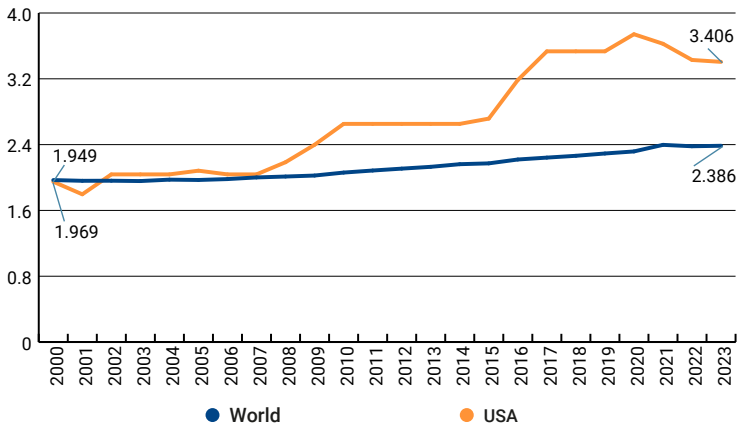
**Polarization permeates every aspect of American democracy. Several structural features of the American political system are believed to exacerbate this phenomenon.**

Polarization permeates every aspect of American democracy. Several structural features of the American political system are believed to exacerbate this phenomenon (also referred to as ‘hyper-partisanship’), including the two-party system (Sullivan 2022); electoral system design features, with a winner-takes-all system, often implemented in single-member districts using first-past-the-

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<sup>1</sup> Author’s calculations based on V-Dem data (V-Dem Institute, V-Dem Dataset, version 14 (2024), [n.d.], <<https://doi.org/10.23696/mcwt-fr58>>).

Figure 2.1. Political polarization—world average and the USA (1975–2023)



Note: Y-axis: V-Dem indicator of political polarization; X-axis: Year.  
 Source: V-Dem Institute, V-Dem Dataset, version 14 (2024), [n.d.],  
<https://doi.org/10.23696/mcwt-fr58>.

post voting (Drutman 2021; Protect Democracy 2022); primary elections (in which only a quarter of the electorate participates), which some analysts argue encourage candidates to move away from the centre towards the extremes, as primary voters tend to be more politically engaged and ideologically driven than the general electorate (Sullivan 2022; Drutman 2021; Hirano et al. 2010; States United Democracy Center 2022); and the reduction in competitive congressional districts (which, in October 2024, amount to around only 10 per cent) caused by partisan redistricting and the geographic sorting of voters, which like primaries promote more extreme candidates in electoral districts where one political party has a significant and consistent majority (Sullivan 2022; Cook Political Report 2024).

However, polarization in the USA is also exacerbated by more recent non-structural factors such as the increased fragmentation of the media landscape, with the rise of partisan news outlets, the decline of local media (Klein 2020; Muse Abernathy and Stonebely 2023) and—similar to other countries—social media-fuelled polarization. Social factors such as demographic shifts and backlash against progress for minority rights (e.g. racial minorities and LGBTQIA+ groups) have also played a role in reinforcing polarization in the USA (Mason 2018; Norris and Inglehart 2019).

**Polarization in the USA is also exacerbated by more recent non-structural factors such as the increased fragmentation of the media landscape and social media-fuelled polarization.**

**Populist parties and a shift towards anti-pluralism (opposition to diversity and minority rights) within existing parties not only arise from but can contribute to further exacerbate societal polarization.**

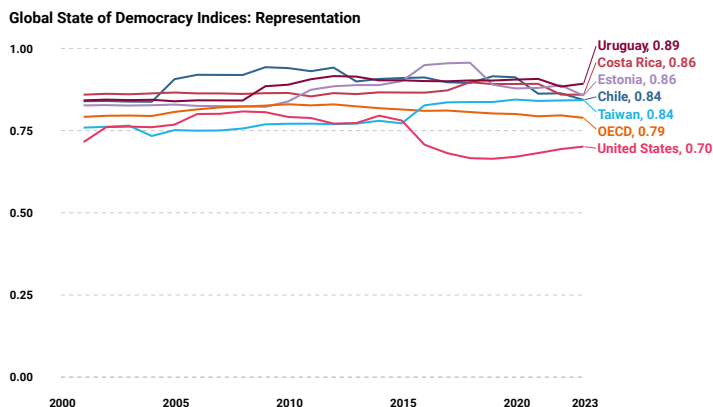
International IDEA's research has shown that societal and political polarization increases both the likelihood and the severity of democratic backsliding (International IDEA 2019). This correlation is also supported by research by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, which has found that half of democracies with high levels of polarization experience democratic decline (McCoy and Press 2022). Populist parties and a shift towards anti-pluralism (opposition to diversity and minority rights) within existing parties—both of which are on the rise worldwide and in the latter case also in the US Republican Party—not only arise from but can contribute to further exacerbate societal polarization (Norris and Inglehart 2019; Medzihorsky and Lindberg 2023; Lührmann et al. 2020).

## 2.2. REPRESENTATION

### Box 2.1. GSoD Indices data for Representation

The category of Representation in the GSoD Indices aggregates the subfactors of Credible Elections, Inclusive Suffrage, Free Political Parties, Elected Government, Effective Parliament and Local Democracy.

According to the GSoD Indices, the quality of Representation in the USA is currently in the lower band of the high range, ranking 46th among 173 countries covered by the GSoD Indices. This is a significant drop from 26th place in 2006 but an improvement from 56th place in 2018. Newer democracies, such as Chile, Costa Rica, Estonia, Taiwan and Uruguay, which all rank among the top 15 countries in the world on this indicator, have surpassed the USA in terms of the quality of Representation. Levels of Representation in the USA are significantly below the OECD average (0.70 compared with 0.79).





From an expert point of view, levels of Representation have historically been high in the USA when observed from a global comparative perspective. In recent years, however, despite a gradual recovery from a dip between 2016 and 2019, the quality of Representation in the USA is lower than it was a decade ago. Moreover, public opinion data captures a widening gap between public perceptions of representation—sharply divided along partisan lines—and expert views. Both built-in system features and other more recent phenomena, such as polarization and the spread of disinformation, influence the quality and effective functioning of democratic representation in the USA. The structural vulnerabilities of the US system of political representation could—in a context of polarization, a closely divided electorate and the emergent risks of the digital age—pose potential risks that might contribute to the further weakening of US democracy.

### 2.2.1. Credible Elections

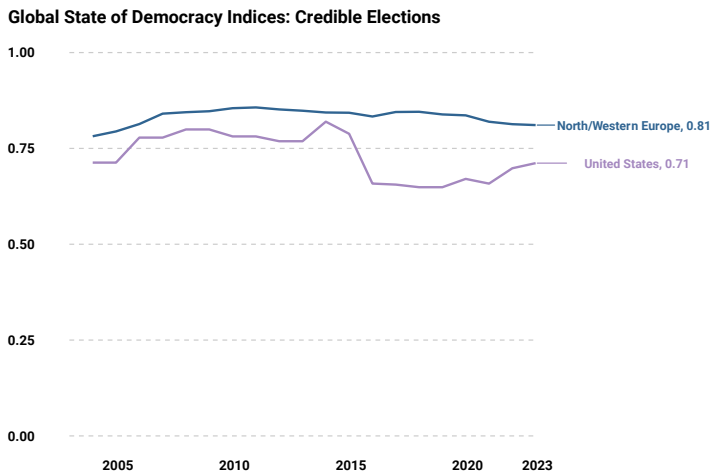
The USA has a high level of electoral integrity, as measured by the GSoD indicator on Credible Elections. The decline in the US score from 2016 to 2019 can be explained by a number of factors, including heightened attention to cases of gerrymandering and voter suppression, the spread of disinformation and concerns over Russian interference in the 2016 US elections, in which cyberattacks and extensive social media manipulation were used to attempt to influence public opinion and sow discord. This had a damaging effect on public trust in the electoral process (Eisen et al. 2019).

There is a sharp contrast between expert views on the credibility of US elections and public opinion. A survey conducted by International IDEA (2024b) showed that less than half (47 per cent) of US respondents had faith in the credibility of the most recent US presidential election (in 2020). However, trust in elections is sharply divided along partisan lines, with 80 per cent of Democratic voters expressing faith, versus only 32 per cent of Republican voters (International IDEA 2024b). Two other public opinion surveys confirm these findings (Monmouth University 2022; Monmouth University 2024). Despite these sharp differences between expert views and public perceptions, a number of other countries in the survey (in particular Romania and Taiwan) also showed similar or more pronounced divergences between expert and public views of the freedom and fairness of elections (International IDEA 2024b).

### Box 2.2. GSoD data for Credible Elections

The GSoD factor of Credible Elections measures the presence of free elections generally, including the fairness of electoral laws, the autonomy and capacity of the electoral management body, government intimidation and other election-related irregularities. The indicator does not measure electoral disinformation, trust in the electoral process or electoral polarization. While this indicator is useful for comparing the overall US performance vis-à-vis that of other countries, elections in the USA are administered at the state level. Therefore, the national score for this indicator does not fully capture important state-level differences.

The Credible Elections score for the USA has historically been among the top 35 in the world. This factor peaked in 2014, at 0.82, but declined considerably from 2016 to 2019, before climbing back to the high range in 2023. The USA ranks 46th in the world in terms of Credible Elections, nearly on par with European countries such as Croatia or Iceland.



Since 2016 disinformation has played a significant role in fuelling distrust in the integrity of the US electoral process. In 2020 disinformation campaigns by foreign and US domestic actors (voters and political representatives) spread false claims of voter fraud, although all investigations found insufficient evidence to support the claims or that they affected the election outcome (Cassidy and Izaguirre 2021). On the other hand, several Republican politicians have been charged with purported schemes to attempt to overturn the 2020 presidential election through false electors in five states where former President Donald Trump lost (Marley 2024). The disinformation narrative on voter fraud helped fuel the riots at the

Capitol on 6 January 2021, which sought to derail the certification of the 2020 presidential election, a rare attempt to disrupt the electoral process of a mature democracy ([International IDEA 2021a](#); [International IDEA 2021b](#)).

The continued spread of disinformation on voter fraud four years after the election appears to have been partly successful in sowing distrust in the US electoral system, at least among Republican voters and representatives. Approximately 80 per cent of Republican representatives voted into Congress in the 2022 elections supported this narrative ([Blanco, Wolfe and Gardner 2022](#)). This narrative has displayed remarkable longevity, which has concerning implications for the 2024 elections. According to a poll, 27 per cent fear that votes in the 2024 elections will not be accurately counted and reported, with 46 per cent of Republican respondents holding this view (and 4 per cent of Democrats) ([Suffolk University 2024](#)). Former President Trump, the Republican Party's presidential candidate in 2024, has, with the support of the Republican Party leadership, continued to fuel this narrative, making the 2020 'rigged' election a central piece of his 2024 electoral campaign, while declining to say whether he will accept the 2024 election results. This uncertainty can contribute to undermine public trust in the electoral process ([Hutzler 2024](#)).

The United States stands out in comparison to other mature democracies in this regard. International IDEA's Global State of Democracy Report 2024 reviewed all national elections worldwide since 2020 and noted that in 20 per cent of cases, the losing parties or candidates publicly rejected the outcome (Table 2.1). 43 cases of those included either autocracies, or countries that have since backslid into autocracy, or newer and more fragile democracies. The United States stood out as the only mature democracy in which the losing party or candidate publicly rejected the electoral outcome. If the 2024 elections are once again contested, it will be the only mature democracy where this has occurred twice in the last five years.

Democracy relies on both robust institutions and adherence to norms such as trust in electoral integrity, acceptance of electoral outcomes and peaceful transfers of power from one elected government to another. Disinformation that questions the reliability of the electoral process—especially from political leaders—let alone political violence to disrupt the electoral process, erodes these norms, undermining democracy as a system of government.

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**Table 2.1. Elections in which losing parties or candidates publicly rejected the outcome, 2020–April 2024**

Country	Year	Type of election
Albania	2021	Legislative
Angola	2022	Presidential
Armenia	2021	Legislative
Belarus	2020	Presidential
Benin	2023	Legislative
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2022	Presidential
Burkina Faso	2020	Presidential
Burundi	2020	Presidential
Central African Republic	2020	Presidential
Congo, Republic of	2021	Presidential
Côte d'Ivoire	2020	Presidential
Democratic Republic of the Congo	2023	General
Ecuador	2021	Presidential
Ethiopia	2021	Legislative
Gabon	2023	General
The Gambia	2021	Presidential
Georgia	2020	Legislative
Ghana	2020	Presidential
Guatemala	2023	General
Guinea	2020	Presidential
Indonesia	2024	Presidential
Iraq	2021	Legislative
Kyrgyzstan	2020	Legislative

**Table 2.1. Elections in which losing parties or candidates publicly rejected the outcome, 2020–April 2024 (cont.)**

Country	Year	Type of election
Kyrgyzstan	2021	Legislative
Madagascar	2023	Presidential
Malawi	2020	Presidential
Mauritania	2023	Legislative
Myanmar	2020	Legislative
Nicaragua	2021	Presidential
Nigeria	2023	General
Paraguay	2023	General
Peru	2021	Presidential
Russia	2021	Legislative
Samoa	2021	Legislative
Serbia	2023	Legislative
Sierra Leone	2023	General
Syria	2020	Legislative
Tanzania	2020	Presidential
Togo	2024	Legislative
Trinidad and Tobago	2020	Legislative
Uganda	2021	Presidential
United States	2020	Presidential
Venezuela	2020	Legislative
Zimbabwe	2023	General

Source: International IDEA, *The Global State of Democracy 2024: Strengthening the Legitimacy of Elections in a Time of Radical Uncertainty* (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2024a), <<https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2024.55>>.

Disinformation around elections does not affect the USA alone; it is a global phenomenon ([Asplund and Casentini 2024](#); [International IDEA 2024a](#)). However, the USA could be one of the few mature democracies in the world where the level of disinformation aimed at discrediting elections has reached such a scale and severity, in terms of both infiltrating the party system and fuelling political violence, that it could derail the electoral process ([International IDEA 2024a](#)). This is contrasted with Brazil, a newer democracy, which was also plagued by disinformation—often amplified by former President Jair Bolsonaro—aimed at sowing distrust in the country’s electronic voting system ahead of the 2022 elections. The claims of unfounded electoral fraud led—similar to the 6 January 2021 riots in the USA—to a questioning of the electoral results, with President Bolsonaro’s supporters storming government buildings shortly after the inauguration of the new president. However, the Brazilian judiciary and political leaders (including Jair Bolsonaro’s own party) firmly condemned the riots and reiterated their support for the democratic process and the election results, helping to maintain democratic stability. Former President Bolsonaro has been barred from competing in elections for eight years for his role in spreading disinformation around the 2022 Brazilian elections ([NBC News 2023](#); [Biller and Bridi 2022](#)). The Brazilian judiciary also took decisive steps to curb disinformation, facing criticism from some that the measures infringed free speech, culminating with the judicial decision to ban the social media platform X in Brazil in August 2024 with the legal argument that X does not have a representative in Brazil ([Curzi de Mendonça 2024](#)). Such measures would be all but impossible in the American legal system, where the First Amendment of the Constitution provides robust protection for freedom of speech, including the right to express false or misleading information, with very narrowly defined exceptions.

Many democracies bar or otherwise limit the eligibility of candidates convicted of crimes to run for office ([Venice Commission 2018](#)). However, US legislation diverges from that of many other democracies in this regard. In an unprecedented historical development in May 2024, former President Trump was convicted of 34 criminal charges of falsifying business records ([Green 2024](#)). Despite his conviction, the US legal system allows him to continue to campaign for office—and to be elected if he wins the Electoral College vote. Arguments for allowing candidates convicted of crimes to run for office include, on one hand, enabling inclusivity, redemption and voter sovereignty, while arguments against point to the potential risks for public trust, ethical standards and the integrity of the office.

While not captured by the GSoD Indices, a few other features of the American political system stand out from other countries, and can, in a context of polarization and distrust in institutions, become vulnerabilities for the health of US democracy.

### 2.2.2. US election administration

The USA has a decentralized election administration system, which differs from most other democracies, as key positions such as secretaries of state, local election officials and members of election boards are often filled through partisan elections or political appointments. Most other democracies have independent electoral commissions or other systems that insulate the election administration from political dynamics (Joseph 2021). However, the US electoral system has worked for centuries, based on the premise of trust in the electoral process and the expectation that election officials will put aside their political affiliations when performing their electoral duties. Such an assumption can become a potential vulnerability in a polarized, politicized and distrustful political environment, where officials taking on these roles have greater incentives to act in ways which can undermine the credibility of and trust in elections. A study from May 2024 by the Brennan Center for Justice found that more than three in five election officials said they are concerned about political interference (specifically about political leaders engaging in efforts to interfere with how they do their jobs) in the lead-up to the 2024 presidential election and 13 per cent raised concerns of potentially facing pressure to certify results in favour of a specific candidate or party (Brennan Center for Justice 2024b).

Some states have independent electoral commissions that take election administration out of the hands of political actors: Hawaii and Ohio, for example, use electoral management bodies that comprise an evenly split bipartisan board headed by a non-partisan chair. While the bipartisan composition of the board does not fully insulate it from political pressures, it reduces the risks associated with having a single individual in charge of certifying election results, as is the case in 31 US states (Vanderklipp 2021).

### 2.2.3. Election-related political violence

Political polarization and the spread of disinformation alleging that the 2020 elections were fraudulent has led to widespread threats against election officials and poll workers, which caused difficulties recruiting and retaining officials and workers for the 2022 midterm elections (Bede Kovics 2022; Levine 2022). A May 2024 survey by the Brennan Center for Justice showed that 38 per cent of election

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**The US electoral system has worked for centuries, based on the premise of trust in the electoral process and the expectation that election officials will put aside their political affiliations when performing their electoral duties.**

officials had experienced threats, harassment or abuse and that 34 per cent personally know of local election officials or election workers that have left their jobs at least in part because of fear for their safety, increased threats or intimidation ([Brennan Center for Justice 2024b](#)). The continued spread of disinformation and threats to election officials can—if continued—pose challenges for the 2024 elections and beyond.

It is not only election workers who are targets of harassment of different kinds—so are elected officials at all levels. In the most extreme case, presidential candidate Trump has faced two assassination attempts during the 2024 presidential campaign. Beyond direct political violence, elected representatives at both national and local levels frequently face threats. A 2023 Brennan Center for Justice survey found that more than 40 per cent of state legislators had experienced threats or attacks, and more than 18 per cent of local officeholders. Eighty-nine per cent of state legislators and 52 per cent of local officeholders reported having faced less severe forms of abuse—insults or harassment such as stalking ([Ramachandran et al. 2024](#)). And a survey of current Members of Congress showed that 70 per cent have been subject to ‘direct insulting or threatening messages or communication’ at least ‘somewhat frequently’. A survey of Former Members of Congress conducted in 2023 indicated that 84 per cent were concerned about the possibility of election-related violence in 2024 and an October 2024 poll showed that 73 per cent of voters are concerned about the risk of political violence ([FMC 2024](#); [The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights 2024](#)).

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**Fostering civil discourse, protecting democratic actors, and reducing partisan hate are essential to prevent escalating violence.**

In this highly polarized context, which also has the highest per capita civilian firearm ownership in the world and high levels of gun violence, fostering civil discourse, protecting democratic actors, and reducing partisan hate are essential to prevent escalating violence, with collective societal and bipartisan efforts needed to mitigate these risks to protect American democracy from harm ([International IDEA 2023a](#); [Small Arms Survey 2018](#)).

#### **2.2.4. Senate and Electoral College**

The US electoral system’s structure, including the Senate’s equal representation for states regardless of population and the Electoral College’s allocation of votes, was designed in the 18th century to balance the interests of smaller and larger states. These are system features unique to the USA. However, these structural features pose challenges to equal representation and can erode trust in democratic



institutions, especially in a polarized context, with the winner-takes-all system and the Electoral College, which may lead to outcomes that do not reflect the popular vote. In two (2000 and 2016) of the six presidential elections held between 2000 and 2020, the winner was not the candidate who won the popular vote (i.e. received the most votes nationwide) ([USA.gov 2024](#)). While the Electoral College is difficult to reform (because it requires a constitutional amendment, which needs ratification by two-thirds of both houses of Congress and three-quarters of state legislatures), there is, on the other hand, room for reform at the state level. Maine and Nebraska, for example, both use a variation of proportional representation for allocating their electors' votes, which can decrease the distortion ([Fair Vote n.d.](#)). Another initiative is the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact, where states would (if they can garner 270 electoral votes to pass it) pledge to award their electoral votes to the candidate who wins the national popular vote, bypassing the Electoral College. So far 17 states and the District of Columbia have signed up to the compact, holding collectively 209 electoral votes ([Sharp 2024](#)).

### 2.2.5. Inclusive representation

Inclusion and political representation of all sectors of society matter for the quality of representation. National advances have been observed on this indicator, but progress is far from sufficient, also in comparison with other countries. Female political representation in the USA is significantly lower than in other countries with similar levels of development. While the 118th Congress (2022–2024) has the highest percentage of female representation in its history, only 29 per cent of congressional representatives are women, compared with the Western European average of 36 per cent ([Open Secrets n.d.](#)). Newer democracies such as Mexico and Namibia have reached parity, which the USA continues to be far from ([Inter-Parliamentary Union 2024](#)).

While progress has also been made in the representation of ethnic and racial minority groups in the US Congress, non-Hispanic white Americans remain overrepresented (75 per cent) in relation to their share of the population (59 per cent). Despite this, the 118th Congress is the most racially and ethnically diverse in history, with 28 per cent of the House of Representatives and 12 per cent of the Senate identifying as African-American, Hispanic, Asian American, American Indian, Alaska Native or multiracial ([Schaeffer 2023](#)).

Young people are also under-represented in the US Congress. Although 36 per cent of the US population is between 18 and 44, only

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**Female political representation in the USA is significantly lower than in other countries with similar levels of development.**

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**The 118th Congress is the most racially and ethnically diverse in history.**

12 per cent of representatives in Congress are in this age bracket, although the figure is at a historical high ([Pew Research Center 2023](#)). The USA (together with Australia and Luxembourg) has the largest age representation gap in the OECD (the OECD average for under-40s is 22 per cent) ([OECD n.d.](#)). The average age of the 118th Congress is 58 (with a higher average among Democrats than among Republicans in both chambers) ([Fiscal Note 2023](#)). The global median age for current heads of state is 62. At 81, President Biden is the ninth-oldest head of state in the world; former President Trump—if he wins the 2024 presidential election—would at 78 be among the 20 oldest ([Silver 2024](#)).

Thirteen voting members (2 per cent) of the 118th Congress identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual—the highest number in history, although this category remains under-represented, with 6.5 per cent of the population identifying as LGBTQIA+ ([Schaeffer 2023](#)).

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**Lack of competition affects the overall health of American democracy, as democracy rests on the principle of equal and fair competition.**

#### **2.2.6. Gerrymandering and political competition**

Gerrymandering is the practice of redrawing the boundaries of electoral districts to favour a specific political party or group and is a common legal practice in the USA that is used by both political parties. A practice championed by the Democratic Party has, for example, been to create ‘majority minority’ districts to ensure that minority groups have a fair chance of electing representatives who reflect their interests and concerns ([Skelley 2023](#)). However, gerrymandering can also distort representation by magnifying some votes while diluting others (see 2.3.1: Social Group Equality and Political Equality, on how gerrymandering has historically been used in the USA to dilute minority representation); gerrymandering and partisan redistricting also reduce political competition, having reduced the portion of competitive districts to 14 per cent in 2022, the lowest in 52 years ([Li and Leaverton 2022](#)). In October 2024, only 10 per cent of congressional districts are estimated to be competitive ([Cook Political Report 2024](#)). This lack of competition affects the overall health of American democracy, as democracy rests on the principle of equal and fair competition. Gerrymandering often results in the creation of districts where the dominant party has a significant majority, which can in turn fuel existing polarization, as it can lead to the election of more ideologically extreme candidates (as they need to appeal only to the party’s base rather than a broader constituency) ([Sullivan 2022](#)).

While gerrymandering is a centuries-old legal practice in the USA, partisan districting in other contexts has proven to be a potent

mechanism for undermining democracy. In Hungary, for instance, maps drawn to favour the majority ensured that Fidesz would secure a 10-seat advantage even if the majority and opposition received an equal number of votes (Scheppele 2022).

### 2.2.7. Money in politics

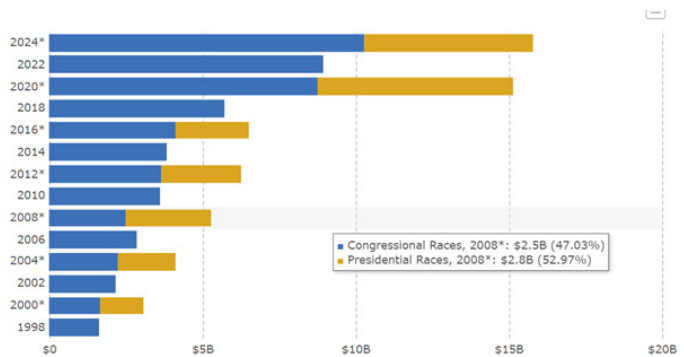
The role of money in politics also affects the quality of representation in the USA. The way political activities and elections are funded can significantly shape the choices available to voters. It determines which candidates make it onto the ballot and can result in political biases where politicians prioritize the desires of wealthy special interests over voters.

The role of money in politics in the USA sets it apart from most other countries because political donation is considered a constitutionally protected right associated with freedom of expression. Supreme Court rulings since 2010 in particular have made campaign finance restrictions more lax allowing unlimited campaign spending by corporations, individuals and unions. Political action committees (PACs), often funded by a few wealthy donors, can collect and donate funds to political campaigns, provided they operate independently from candidates' campaigns (Open Secrets 2024). The consequence of this protected right is both a perceived (Schaeffer 2023) and an actual distortion in the political representation of the population, as it amplifies the influence of wealthy individuals, corporations and special interest groups, allowing them disproportionate influence over policy decisions and elections. In 2022, the top 1 per cent of donors accounted for 99 per cent of all the money raised by PACs. For the 2024 elections, the 50 largest donors had collectively poured over USD 1.6 billion into political committees and other groups (Ense Morse, Melgar and Reston 2024). The 2024 federal election cycle is predicted to be the most expensive in nominal terms in American history (Figure 2.2), with a total cost of USD 15.9 billion in campaign spending (Open Secrets 2024).

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**The role of money in politics in the USA sets it apart from most other countries because political donation is considered a constitutionally protected right associated with freedom of expression.**

Figure 2.2. Total cost of US elections (1990–2024)



Note: \* Presidential election cycle.

Source: Open Secrets, 'Cost of election', [n.d.], <<https://www.opensecrets.org/elections-overview/cost-of-election?cycle=2020&display=T&infl=N>>, accessed 12 October 2024.

## 2.2.8. Effective Parliament

### Box 2.3. GSoD data for Effective Parliament

The Effective Parliament factor in the GSoD Indices measures the ability of the legislature to oversee the executive. While historically high in the USA, this factor fell from a peak of 0.8 in 2016 to a historical low of 0.66 in 2020. It has since risen back to a high level (0.76).

#### 2.2.8.1. Legislative oversight of the executive

An effective parliament is in part defined by its ability to oversee and check the executive, a role which has weakened in the United States since 2016 due to an entrenched two-party system in a polarized political landscape and a closely divided Congress, in which each party has narrow majorities in different chambers of the legislature. This issue became pronounced during the 2016–2020 period, reflected in a significant decline on this indicator during that time (International IDEA 2019). The work of the US House Select Committee on the 6 January 2021 attack was also hampered by

partisan conflicts, exemplifying the weakening of effective legislative oversight in a polarized environment (Reynolds and Maehr 2023).

#### 2.2.8.2. *Legislative efficacy: Partisanship, polarization and gridlock*

The US Congress's ability to function as an effective check is further hindered by partisanship, polarization and gridlock, which can compromise its legislative efficacy. When partisan priorities overshadow the collective responsibility to serve the public effectively, this situation can erode public trust in democratic institutions. While the GSoD Indices do not measure partisanship, polarization and gridlock, these factors nonetheless represent hurdles that the US Congress must surpass in order to perform its functions effectively.

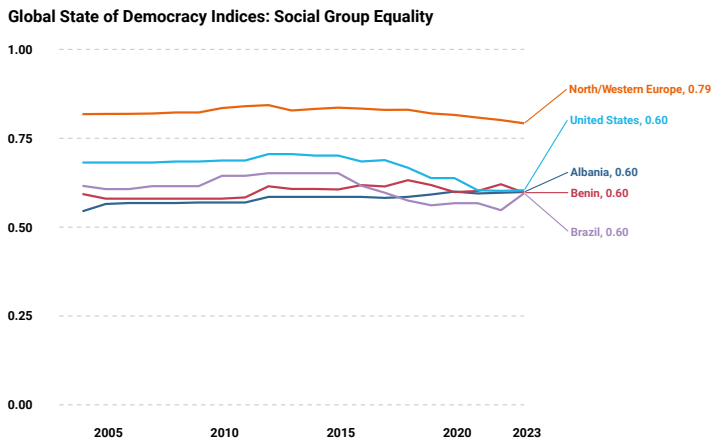
While some friction in the legislative process is intended to promote deliberation, extreme partisanship in the US Congress has in recent years led to frequent deadlock, exacerbated by eroded democratic norms. Government shutdowns (when Congress fails to pass a budget, temporarily halting non-essential federal services), which began in 1977 and which occurred in 2014 and 2018–2019, can exemplify the cost of legislative inefficacy, leading to significant disruptions in federal services in addition to an erosion of public trust in political institutions (Howell and Sindhu 2023). Even threats of shutdowns (such as those in 2023–2024) convey a message of governmental unreliability and dysfunction, which can fuel the public's perception that the political—and democratic—system is dysfunctional and does not prioritize the needs and interests of voters.

The first-time deposition of the speaker of the House in 2023 further exemplified the extreme polarization in the US Congress, showcasing how internal party conflicts can override legislative duties and disrupt governance (International IDEA 2023b). The event underscored the fragility of democratic norms and highlighted the risks of extreme polarization for representative institutions (Warburton, Cowan and Morgan 2023).

## 2.3. RIGHTS

### Box 2.4. GSoD data for Rights

The Rights category of the GSoD Indices includes Access to Justice, Civil Liberties (Freedom of Expression, Freedom of the Press, Freedom of Association and Assembly, Freedom of Movement and Freedom of Religion), Basic Welfare and Political Equality. The USA has performed consistently in the high range on Rights, peaking at a high of 0.80 in 2010. In 2019–2020, and in 2023, it reached a historical low point of 0.73—which is still in high-range compared to other countries. The factor for which the USA scores the lowest is Political Equality, which has historically hovered well below the OECD average (0.61 in 2023 compared with 0.73 for the OECD as a whole). This category includes the subfactors of Social Group Equality, Economic Equality and Gender Equality. The subfactors of Social Group Equality (which measures the enjoyment of civil liberties and power by minority groups) and Economic Equality push the US score for Rights down significantly, with the USA consistently performing well below Western Europe over the past five decades. Economic Equality has declined since 2021. In 2023, the US Social Group Equality score was a mid-range 0.60, compared with 0.79 for Western Europe, on a par with countries such as Albania, Benin, Brazil and Cabo Verde.



### 2.3.1. Social Group Equality and Political Equality

The high level of social group inequality in the United States reflects the systemic racism that often pervades political and social institutions, leading to sustained racial inequality and weakening American democracy (International IDEA 2019, 2021a; Solomon, Maxwell and Castro 2019). This long-standing, unresolved problem reached a tipping point in 2020, when communities across the country took to the streets to protest systemic racism in policing

practices in what was called the Black Lives Matter movement ([International IDEA 2021a](#)).

Moreover, restrictive voter laws and gerrymandering have historically been used in the United States to suppress voting among minorities ([International IDEA 2019](#)). A 2013 Supreme Court case (*Shelby County v. Holder*)<sup>2</sup> largely ended the protective requirement which mandated that states with a history of discrimination obtain federal approval before changing voting laws, increasing the risk of voter suppression and disenfranchisement of minority voters ([Neely and McMinn 2018](#); [International IDEA 2019](#)). In addition to racial districting, several US states have long-standing practices of using voter laws to interfere with the ability of racial minorities to vote. However, Brennan Center for Justice research shows that since the 2020 elections, more laws (168) have been enacted to expand access to voting than to restrict it (78) highlighting a positive trend toward increased voter access ([Brennan Center for Justice 2024a](#)).

LGBTQIA+ rights, central to an inclusive democracy, have also seen a backlash in recent years. In 2023 alone, for example, 19 states enacted 20 bans on gender-affirming care for trans youth ([Forouzan and Guarnieri 2023](#)), and 17 states enacted more than 30 restrictions on talking about LGBTQIA+ issues in schools as of the beginning of the 2023–2024 school year ([Yurcaba 2023](#)).

Economic inequality also has implications for American democracy. Levels of economic inequality are significantly higher in the USA (0.59) than in the OECD on average (0.73). From 2020 to 2023 levels of economic inequality reached an all-time high. A growing body of scholarship supports the notion that inequality—and in particular *growing* inequality—makes political systems susceptible to populist backlash (e.g. [Sitaraman 2018](#)). This happens in several ways. An increasing concentration of wealth at the top gives a small number of elites outsized political influence, particularly given the USA's lax rules surrounding money in politics. It can also lead to resentment among some voters, who may be drawn to populist leaders promising to restore prosperity that they feel has been undermined by policies on affirmative action or immigration, which they may perceive as impacting opportunities for or the rights of non-minority groups ([Stoetzer 2021](#)). However, economic inequality tends to hit poor Americans and Americans of colour hardest. Due to a number of considerations, diminished economic power also means diminished

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**Levels of economic inequality are significantly higher in the USA than in the OECD on average. From 2020 to 2023 levels of economic inequality reached an all-time high.**

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<sup>2</sup> *Shelby County v. Holder*, 570 U.S. 529 (2013).

political power, adding further to the distortion of representation in American democracy.

### 2.3.2. Gender Equality

Gender Equality is a core democratic principle of Political Equality as measured by the GSoD Indices. Levels of Gender Equality are significantly lower in the USA (at 0.70) than in other OECD countries, where levels are high (0.78), or in Western Europe, where levels are very high (0.86). The most significant challenge to Gender Equality in the USA in recent years has been the US Supreme Court's 2022 ruling in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, which struck down the 1973 decision in *Roe v. Wade*,<sup>3</sup> which guaranteed the constitutional right to abortion, reversing nearly 50 years of due process rights and protections. As a result, 41 states have enacted abortion bans with only limited exceptions; 28 states have abortion bans based on gestational duration, with 13 states having full bans ([Guttmacher 2024](#)). Data shows that a majority (63 per cent) of Americans think abortion should be legal in all or most cases ([Pew Research Center 2024](#)). Only 22 countries in the world have a complete ban on abortions (including the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and the Philippines), while a large majority of countries permit abortion under some circumstances, and most industrialized nations allow it without restrictions ([Council on Foreign Relations 2024](#)).

### 2.3.3. Freedom of Expression and Freedom of the Press

#### Box 2.5. GSoD data for Freedom of Expression and Freedom of the Press

When it comes to the subfactor of Freedom of Expression, the USA has historically had the highest score in the world at 0.99. However, this score declined from 2013 to 2015 and dropped significantly from 2017 to 2019. It is now at 0.75, below the Western European average (0.81).

The Freedom of the Press subfactor measures the extent to which news media are independent, diverse, honest and free to criticize the government (i.e. free from censorship, whether government- or self-imposed). This subfactor started declining in 2015 and hit its lowest point in 2020 (0.70). It has since seen some improvement (to 0.74) but remains much lower than in Western Europe (0.83).

3 *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113 (1973).



The decline in freedom of the press in the USA has stemmed primarily from three phenomena. First, from 2017 to 2020, media outlets faced verbal harassment as well as access restrictions to White House press briefings ([International IDEA 2019](#)). Journalism and a free press are vital for democracy because they provide essential oversight and inform the public. Restrictions on or the ridiculing of journalists undermine these functions, weakening accountability and public trust in the media. Second, the increasing concentration of media ownership and the disappearance of many local news outlets in the USA (the State of Local News Project estimates that the United States has lost almost 2,900 newspapers since 2005—nearly a third of its newspapers) has reduced the pluralism of voices in US media and created wide ‘news deserts’ ([Muse Abernathy and Stonebely 2023](#)). Third, the media landscape in the USA has also become increasingly polarized along partisan lines. A study by the Pew Research Center ahead of the 2020 elections showed that Republicans and Democrats placed their trust in two nearly polar opposite news media environments (65 per cent of Republicans trusted Fox News; 67 per cent of Democrats trusted CNN), which contributes to the further polarization of political opinions ([Jurkowitz et al. 2020](#)). Half of Americans get their news from social media ([Pew Research Center 2023](#)).

#### 2.3.4. Access to Justice

Access to Justice in the USA is in the high range according to the GSoD Indices (on a par with the OECD average but 9 percentage points below Western Europe) after suffering a historic dip between 2016 and 2019. It is one of only two indicators that have since increased and recovered to their pre-2016 levels. However, public perceptions of access to justice diverge sharply from expert views. Only 26 per cent of Americans believe that the courts often or always provide equal and fair access to justice, and low-income groups, self-identified minorities, those living in rural areas and women are less likely to express confidence in the courts. There is an 11 percentage point gap between low-income groups and other groups’ confidence in the courts ([International IDEA 2024b](#)).

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**Public perceptions  
of access to justice  
diverge sharply from  
expert views.**

## 2.4. RULE OF LAW

### Box 2.6. GSoD data for Rule of Law

The Rule of Law category in the GSoD Indices looks at both the actions of the government and the ability of the judiciary to check government power. It includes four factors—Predictable Enforcement, Personal Integrity and Security, Absence of Corruption and Judicial Independence.

Rule of Law in the USA began declining in 2017 and hit an all-time low of 0.67 in 2020. It has since edged its way back into the high range at 0.71 but remains well below the Western European average of 0.84.

Predictable Enforcement began gradually declining in 2012, but the decline became more

significant starting in 2017. The low point for this factor came in 2020, when it bottomed out at 0.66. It, too, has since climbed back to 0.70 but is still well below the Western European average (0.83).

Levels of Personal Integrity and Security have consistently remained lower than in Western Europe.

The USA has historically scored high in terms of Absence of Corruption, but its score dipped in 2017 to 0.68. It has since climbed back to high performance at 0.82, close to the Western European average of 0.85.

### 2.4.1. Judicial Independence

The separation of powers and judicial independence are central tenets of a healthy democracy. Levels of Judicial Independence have always been historically high in the USA, nearly on par with Western Europe (0.76 versus 0.79) and well above the OECD average (0.71).

However, actual or perceived attempts to politicize the judiciary present serious risks to the health of American democracy. The increasing politicization of the judicial appointments process in the USA has resulted in greater partisanship among judges, particularly at the Supreme Court level. This trend was exacerbated in 2016 by the Senate's unprecedented refusal to vote on certain nominations, allowing President Trump to appoint an extra justice, thus shifting the Court's balance towards conservative judges in 2018 (Elving 2018; Larsen and Devins 2022). Additionally, recent ethics issues among justices (involving concerns about potential conflicts of interest and impartiality arising from payments for trips for justices and signs of public display of their spouses' political affiliations) may undermine public trust in the judiciary's non-partisan character and impartiality. As a result, public trust in the Supreme Court plummeted from 66

per cent in 2020 to 40 per cent in 2024, with partisan differences in perceptions increasing during that time (in 2024, 57 per cent of Republicans approved of the Supreme Court versus 27 per cent of Democrats) (Franklin 2024). Despite these challenges, the US judiciary's structural features, such as life tenure and jurisdictional safeguards, make judicial capture less likely compared with countries such as El Salvador, Hungary and Poland, though the long-term influence of presidential appointments remains significant.

In 2024 former President Trump's questioning of the courts' independence and claims of a 'weaponized' justice system can threaten the rule of law and democracy by eroding public trust in judicial processes (Mascaro and Jalonick 2024). Partisan divides, complex legal issues and media narratives may further lead to public perceptions of judicial bias, reduced trust and potentially support for actions that undermine judicial independence and democracy.

Moreover, former President Trump's threats to politicize the Department of Justice if he wins the 2024 presidential election raise rule-of-law concerns about his potential use of the special-prosecutor mechanism to target adversaries and his potential dismissal of prosecutors investigating his administration (Slattery, Lynch and Goudsward 2024). While such actions are legally permissible since the Department of Justice is part of the executive branch, they violate core norms of the rule of law and half a century of accepted practice that prevents presidents from politically interfering with specific cases. This situation is exacerbated by the structure of the US system, where special prosecutors, though intended to be independent, remain accountable to the executive branch, leading to the potential erosion of their autonomy in a rapidly polarizing political environment (Congressional Research Service 2018).

## Box 2.7. Potential channels of democratic backsliding and their use in a comparative perspective

### *Constitutional*

Countries such as Hungary, Nicaragua, Turkey and Venezuela have backslid democratically (and have ultimately regressed to authoritarianism) through constitutional amendments or new constitutions, supported by parliamentary majorities and referendums. In El Salvador the Constitutional Chamber allowed President Nayib Bukele to run for re-election despite opposition claims of unconstitutionality (AFP 2021). In contrast, the US Constitution is difficult to amend, placing interpretative power with the Supreme Court, which can become risky if the Court becomes partisan—or perceived as partisan, potentially limiting rights and weakening electoral guardrails, although it can also play a key role in checking backsliding forces (e.g. in the case of *Moore v. Harper*<sup>1</sup>) (Jacobson 2022).

### *Legislative*

In many countries, backsliding has been enabled by regular legislation, such as judicial reforms, restrictions on civil society funding, exclusionary citizenship laws and gerrymandering. These measures alter constitutional structures significantly. In the USA tight majorities and procedural tools such as the filibuster make passing both backsliding and anti-backsliding legislation difficult at the federal level. For example, the Freedom to Vote Act and the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, as well as a watered-down combination of both, were blocked by the Senate through several filibusters in 2021 (Brennan Center for Justice 2023; Hulse 2022). State-level legislation is often less politically visible than national legislation and can target key areas left constitutionally to the states, such as election administration, and should therefore be watched from a democracy perspective.

### *Procedural*

Even without new legislation, procedural adjustments can legally undermine democracy. Poland's Law and Justice party used tactics such as fast-tracking government-sponsored bills via individuals and limiting opposition debate to pass legislation with severe constitutional impacts (International IDEA 2023c). Similarly, procedural manipulations in the USA, such as the filibuster and exploitation of the rules for Supreme Court nominations, have thwarted legislation. Recent changes, such as lowering the threshold for motions (making it easier for a single member to force a vote to remove the speaker), highlight the susceptibility of US democracy to procedural backsliding (Macagnone 2023).

### *Norms and constitutional or legal loopholes*

One channel of democratic backsliding is the degradation of democratic norms—unwritten rules of behaviour and mutual respect that ensure that political actors adhere to principles, such as the

1 *Moore v. Harper*, grant of certiorari, US Supreme Court, No. 21-1271 (30 June 2022).

### Box 2.7. Potential channels of democratic backsliding and their use in a comparative perspective (cont.)

peaceful transfer of power, respect for minority rights, and checks and balances, which maintain the system's stability beyond just legal frameworks. The USA stands apart from most other countries in being especially reliant on such norms—making it also uniquely susceptible to this course of backsliding. Historically, norms such as respecting electoral outcomes and respecting judicial authority and a free press have been central—and unquestioned—pillars of American democracy regardless of party affiliation. However, the past decade has seen a decline in civil democratic discourse, respect for the rule of law, minority rights, limitations on executive power and the legitimacy of the opposition. This decline, coupled with constitutional and legal loopholes such as those in the 1887 Electoral Count Act, contributed to events such as the 6 January 2021 insurrection, eventually prompting bipartisan reform to close these loopholes (Bauer and Goldsmith 2022).

## 2.5. PARTICIPATION

### Box 2.8. GSoD data for Participation

The Participation indicator of the GSoD Indices measures the active political involvement of citizens. It includes Civil Society, Civic Engagement and Electoral Participation. Levels of Participation have been historically high in the USA, which has consistently ranked among the top 20 countries in the world.

The USA has always ranked higher than Western Europe in terms of the Civil Society indicator, though it dipped from 0.99 in 2015 to 0.88 from 2017–2020 and in 2022–2023, while remaining firmly in the high-range. It scores lower in terms of Civic Engagement, but the score has remained consistently high.

Levels of Electoral Participation have stayed squarely in the mid-range and score consistently lower than in Western Europe (around 40 per cent compared with 60 per cent in Western Europe). However, levels of Electoral Participation reached an all-time high in 2020 at 62 per cent.

The strongest dimension of US democracy is citizen participation. Levels of Participation are among the highest in the world: in 2023 the USA ranked eighth in the world in Participation. Although other indicators of democratic quality declined in recent years,

Participation is the only indicator that saw no significant change between 2016 and the present. There is a notable reason for this. The strong legal protections for speech and association under the US Constitution make it difficult to place restrictions on civil society. Moreover, the country experienced record voter turnout in the 2018, 2020 and 2022 elections, with Electoral Participation levels at all-time highs. Sixty-six per cent of the voting-age population voted in the 2020 presidential election (the highest figure since 1990), and the 2018 midterm elections (the turnout for midterms tends to be lower than for presidential elections) had a 49 per cent turnout (the highest figure since 1914). Although the turnout for the 2022 midterms was slightly lower, at 46 per cent, it was the highest since 1970 ([Hartig et al. 2023](#)). High levels of Electoral Participation and Civic Engagement are crucial to US democracy because they ensure government accountability, foster informed decision making, and strengthen the participation of diverse interests and voices in the democratic process. Together with a vibrant and free press and a resilient and impartial judicial system, they provide hope that American democracy will endure despite challenges by ensuring active public involvement, fostering resilience, and reinforcing the core democratic principles of accountability and participation.

## Chapter 3

# CONCLUSION

US democracy, once a global benchmark, has faced significant challenges over the past decade. In 2021 the USA faced an unprecedented violent disruption of its electoral process, with the losing candidate in the presidential election refusing to accept the results, for over four years, challenging a fundamental cornerstone of any democracy—acceptance of electoral results and the peaceful transfer of power. Of 44 national elections in the world since 2020 where the election results were contested by the losing parties or candidates publicly rejecting the outcome, the United States was the only mature democracy. This situation demonstrates that not just newer, but also mature, democracies can be vulnerable to democratic backsliding, especially when democratic norms erode. Historical assumptions of respect for basic democratic rules embedded in the constitution, legislation and regulations can become loopholes and vulnerabilities that can be exploited to undermine democracy.

Despite recent improvements, the quality of US democracy has eroded considerably compared with a decade ago, and the USA has now been surpassed by newer democracies such as Costa Rica and Taiwan. Ongoing political polarization, systemic vulnerabilities, the spread of disinformation and the risk of political violence continue to threaten the health and stability of US democracy. Challenges to American democracy are exacerbated by structural features such as the two-party system, the Electoral College, gerrymandering and legislative loopholes, among others. These factors reduce political competition and distort representation and can, in a polarized environment, undermine public trust in democracy.

The upcoming 2024 presidential election is a pivotal moment for American democracy, underscoring the urgent need for robust

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**US democracy, once a global benchmark, has faced significant challenges over the past decade.**

reforms and increased resilience against internal and external threats. Addressing these systemic vulnerabilities, along with addressing grievances and perceived inequalities, is crucial for restoring and sustaining the integrity of US democracy in a global context.

This paper does not outline specific policy recommendations that could help strengthen and protect American democracy; a number of existing reports already do that. However, a few areas for potential reform could include the following:

1. Consider reforming the Electoral College through state-level legislation to address distortions owing to the winner-takes-all system and to avoid the mismatch between the popular and the Electoral College vote.
2. Learn from and foster state-level democratic innovations that can reduce political distortions and hyper-partisanship (e.g. proportional representation, ranked-choice voting) and enhance election competitiveness (e.g. independent redistricting commissions).
3. Protect election administration to ensure impartiality, safeguard against political interference and shield election officials from threats.
4. Prioritize education on civic virtues and democratic values to foster a culture of democratic engagement and integrity.



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# About the authors

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# About International IDEA

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization with 35 Member States founded in 1995, with a mandate to support sustainable democracy worldwide.

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