



# LET'S GET REAL

## Where does U.S. democracy stand in the world?

---

**59<sup>TH</sup>**

Freedom House, cofounded by Eleanor Roosevelt, gives an annual report scoring the freedom of world democracies. Note that the U.S. dipped 11 points between 2010 and 2020 to its most recent score of 83. While a score of 83 out of 100 points is not bad, seeing the U.S. at 59th is jarring, especially considering how most western democracies score upwards of 90 points.<sup>1</sup> The U.S. score of 83 is on par with South Korea and Croatia. Scoring at the top are Finland (100), New Zealand (99), Sweden (99), and Norway (98).

---

**20<sup>TH</sup>**

The V-Dem Institute (Varieties of Democracy), based in the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, rates nations based on a spectrum ranging from a closed autocracy to a liberal democracy. In 2021, following the 2020 presidential elections, V-Dem Institute registered a significant step down for American democracy, ranking the United States 31st in the democracy index—no doubt a reflection of the consequences of the Trump administration, the unfounded mistrust in the legitimacy of the 2020 election results, and the violence of the January 6th attack on the Capitol.<sup>2</sup> Our lowest scores among V-Dem's several indices are in those measuring "checks and balances on the executive, respect for civil liberties, the rule of law, and the independence of the legislature and the judiciary."<sup>3</sup>

**1<sup>ST</sup>** The US is 1st worst for campaign spending. Those elected to federal offices raise money year-round with no spending limits.<sup>4</sup> Super PACS—independent expenditure-only political action committees—arose in 2010 after two Supreme Court decisions.<sup>5</sup> Super PACs can legally raise unlimited funds from individuals and corporations, while secretive “dark money” non-profit groups are able to hide the source of their money. According to the Pew Research Center, 77 percent of “Americans overwhelmingly support limits on political campaign spending, and most [65 percent] think new laws could effectively reduce the role of money in politics.”<sup>6</sup> In 2022, President Biden pushed for a donor transparency bill—the DISCLOSE Act—requiring groups to “disclose donors who contributed \$10,000 or more during an election cycle.” However, Republicans in the Senate killed it.<sup>7</sup>

**24<sup>TH</sup>**

On perception of corruption, Transparency International ranks the U.S. 24th from the best worldwide, tied with Barbados and behind most of our peer countries.<sup>8</sup> Corporate lobbying, campaign financing, and dark money organizations impair vertical accountability by bestowing disproportionate influence constituents over others and undermining democratic governance.



**31<sup>ST</sup>** In percent of the voting age population that votes, the U.S. ranks down at 31.<sup>9</sup> In 2020, only 66 percent of our voting age population voted. That’s low, but it’s higher than seen in more than a century. In 1980, only 54 percent voted, while in 1996 it was a paltry 51.7 percent.<sup>10</sup> Our voter turnout rate also differs significantly by state. In 2022, Texas had the lowest turnout, at 51 percent. The state offers neither vote-by-mail nor no-excuse-absentee voting.<sup>11</sup> By contrast, in 2020, Minnesota had the highest turnout, at almost 75 percent.<sup>12</sup>

For voter suppression in the first half of 2023, 322 bills restricting the right to vote were proposed in 45 states. In 11 states, 13 repressive laws were enacted in 2023 alone. Of the 13 laws, 7 limit access to mail-in voting and 6 impose stricter ID requirements at voting centers.<sup>13</sup> All but one (New Mexico) of the 11 states that successfully enacted restrictive voting laws were won by Donald Trump in 2020. Both historic and present-day legislation that restricts voting is steeped in overt or covert racial discrimination.

Though grandfather clauses, poll taxes, and literacy tests are now illegal, voter suppression efforts have continued for years. Specifically, pressure for photo IDs decrease voter participation, and by extension, the strength of democracy.<sup>14</sup>

According to the Center for American Progress, as of 2016, 9.5 million American adults lacked full voting rights; most were people of color.<sup>15</sup>