

A Diagnostic Assessment of Democratic Health in the United States

Executive Summary

This report introduces and applies a novel diagnostic framework for assessing the health of liberal democracies. The framework is designed to be impartial, universally applicable, and capable of capturing the nuanced processes of both democratic resilience and decay. Its efficacy is validated against the historical case of democratic collapse in Germany from 1933 to 1938, ensuring its sensitivity to early warning signs of authoritarianism. The core of this report is the exhaustive application of this framework to the current administration of the United States, providing a data-driven, indicator-by-indicator analysis of the nation's democratic condition.

The diagnostic model is structured around three interdependent pillars: **Pillar I: Foundational Institutions and the Rule of Law**, which assesses the state's core architecture; **Pillar II: Civil Liberties and the Public Sphere**, which evaluates the space for public contestation and organization; and **Pillar III: Political Culture and Norms**, which measures the unwritten rules and shared values that animate the democratic system. These pillars are disaggregated into twelve specific, measurable indicators.

The assessment of the United States reveals a democratic system under significant and sustained stress. While the formal architecture of democracy—its constitutional rights, electoral processes, and legal structures—largely remains intact, the system is afflicted by a severe degradation of the political norms and institutional forbearance that are essential for its proper functioning. Key findings indicate a deep and widening chasm between the nation's democratic ideals and its political reality. Foundational institutions, particularly the judiciary and the electoral process, face acute politicization and a crisis of public trust. Civil liberties, while robustly protected by law, are challenged by a polluted information ecosystem, economic pressures on the free press, and targeted political attacks on academic freedom. Most critically, the political culture is characterized by a severe erosion of mutual toleration, the normalization of rhetoric that delegitimizes political opposition, and historically low levels of public confidence in the democratic process itself.

The overall diagnosis is not one of imminent collapse but of a "flawed democracy" exhibiting symptoms of chronic, low-grade democratic erosion, or "backsliding." The divergence in assessments from major global indices—with some rating the U.S. "Free" based on its formal rights and others "autocratizing" based on the decay of its processes—is itself a key indicator of this condition. The nation stands at a critical juncture, where the resilience of its civil society and remaining institutional checks are being tested against powerful systemic pressures, including extreme political polarization, the corrosive influence of money in politics, and profound socio-economic divides.

Table 1: U.S. Democratic Health Scorecard (2024)

Pillar / Indicator	Assessment Score (1-10)	Trend
Pillar I: Foundational Institutions and the Rule of Law		
1.1: Electoral Process Integrity & Pluralism	6.5	▼
1.2: Judicial Independence & Adherence to Rulings	6.0	▼
1.3: Legislative & Executive Checks and Balances	6.0	▼
1.4: Non-Politicization of the Civil Service & Security Apparatus	6.5	▼
Pillar II: Civil Liberties and the Public Sphere		
2.1: Freedom of Expression, Press, and Information	7.5	▼
2.2: Associational and Organizational Rights (Civil Society)	8.5	—
2.3: Academic and Cultural Freedom	6.5	▼
2.4: Protection from Illegitimate State Force & Surveillance	6.0	—
Pillar III: Political Culture and Norms		
3.1: Acceptance of Legitimate Political Opposition	4.5	▼
3.2: Rejection of Political Violence	5.5	▼
3.3: Equal Protection & Minority Rights	6.0	▼
3.4: Public Trust in Democratic Processes	4.0	▼

Note: Score is on a 1-10 scale, where 10 represents the highest level of democratic health. Trend indicates direction of change over the recent period: ▲ (Improving), — (Stable), ▼ (Declining).

Part I: A Diagnostic Framework for the Resilience and Decay of Liberal Democracy

1.1 Introduction to Democratic Assessment Methodologies

The measurement of democracy is a complex and contested field. Leading global indices, while invaluable, often produce divergent assessments of the same country due to differences in methodology, definitions, and the weighting of various democratic components.¹ For instance, Freedom House's focus on foundational political rights and civil liberties may classify a country as "Free," while the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), with its emphasis on political culture, may deem it a "Flawed Democracy," and the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project, with its highly disaggregated data, might identify a process of "autocratization".² This divergence is not a failure of measurement but a crucial finding in itself. For a stable, healthy democracy, assessments from credible indices should broadly converge. Significant divergence suggests a system in a state of contradiction or stress, where certain democratic elements remain strong while others are actively eroding. In the context of the United States, this points to a persistence of *de jure* constitutional rights coexisting with a severe degradation of *de facto* institutional processes and norms. This report, therefore, proposes a synthesized framework designed to capture this nuance by integrating the strengths of existing models.

This new framework draws upon:

- The structural clarity of **Freedom House**, which provides a robust two-pillar foundation of Political Rights and Civil Liberties.⁵
- The multidimensional and disaggregated approach of **V-Dem**, which acknowledges that democracy encompasses electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian principles.⁷
- The EIU's critical focus on **political culture and participation**, recognizing that institutions do not operate in a vacuum but are animated by public attitudes and behaviors.³
- The citizen-centric perspective of **International IDEA**, which emphasizes that democracy must be responsive to the needs and aspirations of the people.¹⁰
- The concept of cultivating democratic values throughout society, adapted from the **Council of Europe's** work on education for democratic culture.¹²

The resulting framework is organized into a logical hierarchy of three pillars: **Foundational Institutions and the Rule of Law** (the state's essential architecture), **Civil Liberties and the Public Sphere** (the space for citizen action and contestation), and **Political Culture and Norms** (the shared values that sustain the system). By assessing both formal rules and informal, unwritten codes of conduct, this framework provides a more holistic and sensitive diagnostic tool for evaluating democratic health.

1.2 The Diagnostic Framework: Pillars and Indicators

The framework presented below consists of three pillars and twelve indicators. Each indicator is defined by a set of guiding questions. To validate its relevance and sensitivity to severe democratic decay, each indicator is mapped to a key event or process during the collapse of the Weimar Republic and the consolidation of Nazi power in Germany between 1933 and 1938. This "stress test" ensures the framework can identify the critical warning signs of authoritarianism, fulfilling a core requirement of the analysis.

A crucial insight derived from this historical validation concerns the sequence of democratic collapse and the identification of a potential "point of no return." The erosion of Pillar III (Political Culture) and Pillar II (Civil Liberties)—such as the scapegoating of minorities, attacks on the press, and encouragement of political violence—are the early, often highly visible, warning signs. However, as long as Pillar I (Foundational Institutions) remains intact, a pathway to systemic self-correction theoretically exists through elections, judicial review, or legislative action. The true "exit signal" for a citizen assessing systemic risk is the collapse of Pillar I. When the legislature is neutered, the civil service purged, and the judiciary bypassed, the system loses its capacity for recourse and self-correction. At that point, any group can be targeted with impunity, and the regime change becomes consolidated. This hierarchical understanding of decay informs the structure of the framework and the subsequent analysis.

Table 2: The Democratic Health Diagnostic Framework

Pillar / Indicator	Key Assessment Questions	Historical Validation (Nazi Germany, 1933-1938)
Pillar I: Foundational Institutions and the Rule of Law		
1.1: Electoral Process Integrity & Pluralism	Are elections free, fair, and competitive? Are electoral laws and frameworks impartial? Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to gain power? Are results accepted by all major political actors? ³	The March 1933 Reichstag election was marred by the intimidation of opponents following the Reichstag Fire Decree. The Enabling Act of March 1933 subsequently rendered all future elections meaningless by granting Hitler dictatorial powers. ¹⁵
1.2: Judicial Independence & Adherence to Rulings	Is the judiciary independent from political interference? Are appointments fair and unbiased? Do other branches of government comply with judicial decisions? Is a parallel, politicized justice system created? ¹⁶	The creation of the "People's Court" (Volksgerichtshof) in 1934 to try cases of treason outside the regular judicial system represented a complete politicization of justice and an abandonment of the rule of law. ¹⁹

1.3: Legislative & Executive Checks and Balances	Does the legislature provide effective oversight of the executive? Is the executive constrained by law and formal checks? Are emergency powers clearly defined, time-limited, and subject to oversight? ²⁰	The Reichstag Fire Decree (Feb. 1933) suspended constitutional rights indefinitely under the guise of an emergency. The Enabling Act (March 1933) formally transferred legislative power to the executive, turning the Reichstag into a ceremonial body. ¹⁵
1.4: Non-Politicization of the Civil Service & Security Apparatus	Are civil service, law enforcement, and military appointments based on merit or political loyalty? Do these bodies serve the state or a political party/leader? Are there purges of perceived disloyal elements? ⁹	The "Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service" (April 1933) purged Jews and political opponents from all government positions. The "Night of the Long Knives" (June 1934) eliminated the leadership of the SA, securing the armed forces' loyalty directly to Hitler. ²³
Pillar II: Civil Liberties and the Public Sphere		
2.1: Freedom of Expression, Press, and Information	Is there a free and independent media, or is it state-controlled? Is there censorship or widespread self-censorship? Is the information environment polluted by state-sponsored disinformation? ¹⁸	The Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, established in March 1933, assumed total control over all media. The "Editors Law" (Oct. 1933) made journalism a state-regulated profession. Widespread book burnings began in May 1933. ²³
2.2: Associational and Organizational Rights (Civil Society)	Can citizens form and operate NGOs, trade unions, religious groups, and other associations freely? Are these groups subject to government pressure, co-optation, or dissolution? ²⁵	In May 1933, all independent trade unions were forcibly dissolved and their assets seized, replaced by the state-controlled German Labour Front. All other independent civic and political organizations were either banned or absorbed into Nazi-controlled bodies (<i>Gleichschaltung</i>). ¹⁵

2.3: Academic and Cultural Freedom	Are schools and universities free from political indoctrination? Can academics, artists, and cultural figures work without fear of censorship or reprisal? Is "undesirable" culture purged? ²⁵	The 1933 Civil Service Law led to the firing of over 1,000 university professors. Curricula were aligned with Nazi ideology, emphasizing racial science. "Degenerate art" (<i>Entartete Kunst</i>) was systematically removed from museums and publicly ridiculed. ¹⁵
2.4: Protection from Illegitimate State Force & Surveillance	Are citizens protected from arbitrary detention, torture, and extrajudicial punishment? Is there widespread, warrantless government surveillance? Is there a secret police force operating outside the law? ⁵	The Gestapo (Secret State Police) was established in April 1933, operating with impunity. The first concentration camp for political prisoners was opened at Dachau in March 1933, institutionalizing a system of terror and extra-legal punishment. ²³
Pillar III: Political Culture and Norms		
3.1: Acceptance of Legitimate Political Opposition	Are political opponents treated as legitimate adversaries or as treasonous enemies of the state? Is there rhetoric that denies their right to exist or govern? Is compromise seen as betrayal? ¹⁴	From the outset, Communists, Social Democrats, and other opponents were labeled "enemies of the people" and "November criminals," providing the justification for their violent persecution and exclusion from the national community. ¹⁸
3.2: Rejection of Political Violence	Do political leaders and parties explicitly reject and condemn political violence? Or do they tolerate, encourage, or deploy violence by their supporters or paramilitary groups to achieve political goals? ¹⁴	The Nazi Party's rise was predicated on the political violence of its paramilitary wing, the SA (<i>Sturmabteilung</i>). After 1933, this violence was institutionalized, as seen in the state-sanctioned boycott of Jewish businesses and brutal attacks on political opponents. ¹⁵
3.3: Equal Protection & Minority Rights	Are all segments of the population (ethnic, religious,	The regime immediately began the legal and social

	gender, sexual orientation, etc.) equally protected by law and in practice? Is there official scapegoating of minority groups for societal problems? ⁵	persecution of Jews, culminating in the 1935 Nuremberg Laws, which stripped them of citizenship and forbade intermarriage. Roma, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the disabled were also systematically targeted. ²³
3.4: Public Trust in Democratic Processes	Do citizens believe the system is fair and responsive? Is there widespread belief that elections are rigged or that institutions are corrupt? Is there a decline in support for democracy itself in favor of authoritarian alternatives? ³⁷	The Nazi Party masterfully exploited the profound public distrust in the Weimar Republic, which was widely seen as weak, chaotic, and responsible for national humiliation. They presented dictatorship as a popular and effective solution, leading many to welcome the end of democratic processes. ¹⁵

Part II: An Assessment of Democratic Health in the United States (Current Administration)

This section applies the 12-indicator framework to the United States. The analysis draws upon data from the provided research, including reports from global democracy indices, academic studies, government accountability offices, and civil society organizations, to provide a comprehensive and evidence-based assessment of the nation's democratic health as of 2024.

2.1 Analysis of Foundational Institutions and the Rule of Law

This pillar assesses the core architecture of the state: its electoral system, judiciary, and the checks and balances between branches of government. The health of these institutions is the ultimate guarantor of the rule of law and the primary bulwark against authoritarian consolidation.

2.1.1 Indicator 1.1: Electoral Process Integrity & Pluralism

Assessment: Under Severe Stress (Score: 6.5/10, Trend: Declining ▼)

The formal machinery of U.S. elections remains functional, and the 2024 general election was conducted without evidence of widespread, outcome-altering fraud. However, the ecosystem surrounding the electoral process is deeply fractured and under severe partisan pressure. The V-Dem Institute has noted that the quality of elections is deteriorating in a significant number of countries, with the U.S. being a prominent case of a high-performing country suffering

significant deterioration.⁴ This is reflected in legislative battles over voting access, persistent and unsubstantiated claims of fraud that undermine public confidence, and rising threats against election administrators.

The legislative landscape for voting rights is highly contested and increasingly divergent at the state level. Since the 2020 election, a wave of legislation has altered the rules of voting. In 2024 alone, at least 10 states enacted 19 laws that make it more difficult for eligible citizens to vote, while 21 states enacted 32 laws that expand voting access.⁴⁰ This creates a patchwork of rules where the ease of casting a ballot depends heavily on a voter's geographic location. These legislative changes have had measurable impacts. States that implemented significant new barriers to mail-in voting, such as Georgia (S.B. 202), Florida (S.B. 90), and Texas (S.B. 1), saw dramatic declines in the use of absentee ballots in 2024 compared to 2020. Conversely, states that implemented stricter voter ID laws or withdrew from the Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC), a multi-state partnership for maintaining accurate voter rolls, saw notable increases in the number of provisional ballots cast. In North Carolina, the implementation of a new voter ID law corresponded with a 58% increase in provisional ballots and a slight dip in turnout.⁴¹ While correlation is not causation, these trends suggest that new restrictions are creating friction in the voting process.⁴¹

Table 3: State-Level Voting Law Changes and Observed Impacts (2020-2024)

State	Key Legislative Change (Post-2020)	Observed 2024 Impact
Georgia	S.B. 202: New ID requirements for mail ballots, limited drop boxes.	Mail-in ballots fell from 26% of total votes in 2020 to 5% in 2024. ⁴¹
Florida	S.B. 90: Stricter ID requirements, reduced drop box availability.	Mail-in ballots fell from 44% of total votes in 2020 to 28% in 2024. ⁴¹
Texas	S.B. 1: Tightened mail voting laws, new ID requirements.	Mail-in ballots fell from 9% of total votes in 2020 to 3% in 2024. ⁴¹
North Carolina	Implemented new photo ID requirement for voting.	Provisional ballots increased by 58% from 2020 to 2024. Turnout dipped from 75% to 73%. ⁴¹
Michigan	Prop 2 (2022): Expanded early voting, enshrined other access measures.	Despite a close presidential margin, pre-processing of mail ballots enabled faster results, maintaining public confidence. ⁴¹

Beyond legislative changes, a more profound threat comes from the erosion of trust and the rejection of legitimate results. A significant portion of the electorate and a faction of the political leadership continue to deny the outcome of the 2020 election, a behavior identified as a key indicator of democratic backsliding.¹⁴ This rhetoric has fueled a campaign of harassment and intimidation against state and local election officials, threatening the non-partisan administration of elections.²⁰ While federal agencies like the Department of Homeland Security's Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) are providing support to secure election infrastructure, their efforts are complicated by the politically charged environment.⁴³ The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) has highlighted persistent challenges in maintaining accurate voter registration lists and the difficulty of producing a complete picture of in-person voter fraud, which remains rare despite claims to the contrary.⁴⁴ This combination of practical administrative challenges and corrosive political attacks places the integrity of the entire electoral process under sustained pressure.

2.1.2 Indicator 1.2: Judicial Independence & Adherence to Rulings

Assessment: Declining (Score: 6.0/10, Trend: Declining ▼)

The U.S. judiciary remains structurally independent and its rulings are, for the most part, obeyed. However, it is experiencing a severe crisis of legitimacy driven by intense and escalating politicization. This trend threatens to transform the judiciary from a neutral arbiter of law into a contested arena for partisan battles, undermining its role as a key check on political power.

The process of appointing and confirming federal judges, particularly to the Supreme Court, has become a hyper-partisan affair, a departure from historical norms of deference.²¹ This politicization is now demonstrably affecting judicial outcomes. A 2024 study of over 400,000 federal appellate cases found that partisan alignment between the appellate panel and the trial judge significantly influences the likelihood of a case being reversed. This effect was present even in non-ideological cases, suggesting that partisan identity, rather than purely legal reasoning, is an increasingly influential factor in the judicial process.⁴⁷

The U.S. Supreme Court is at the epicenter of this crisis. A series of high-profile decisions overturning long-standing precedents, such as *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* on reproductive rights, have been decided along sharp ideological lines, fueling perceptions that the court is acting as a political body.¹⁷ The Court's 2024 decision in *Trump v. U.S.*, which granted former presidents absolute immunity from criminal prosecution for "core constitutional" official acts, was seen by its dissenters and many legal scholars as a radical reordering of the separation of powers, placing the presidency "above the law" and weakening a fundamental check on executive power.¹⁷ Compounding these concerns are ethics scandals involving undisclosed gifts and travel accepted by justices, which have damaged the Court's institutional prestige and led to calls for a binding code of conduct.² This erosion of perceived legitimacy is reflected in public opinion. A 2024 Gallup poll found that public confidence in the nation's judicial system and courts has plummeted to a record low of 35%, a 24-point drop since 2020. This decline is sharper than for any other major U.S. institution measured.⁴⁸ While trust in state courts is higher, at 63%, it has also been on a

downward trend and shows significant partisan divides.⁴⁹ This collapse in public trust is a critical vulnerability, as the judiciary's authority ultimately rests not on force, but on its perceived legitimacy and impartiality.

2.1.3 Indicator 1.3: Legislative & Executive Checks and Balances

Assessment: Weakening (Score: 6.0/10, Trend: Declining ▼)

The formal system of checks and balances between the legislative and executive branches remains in place, but its effectiveness has been significantly weakened by the erosion of unwritten norms of forbearance and mutual respect. The result is a system characterized by legislative gridlock and a corresponding aggrandizement of executive power, a classic symptom of democratic backsliding.²²

There is a well-documented historical trend of expanding presidential power, with successive administrations using executive orders and other unilateral actions to bypass a deadlocked Congress.³⁹ This dynamic is exacerbated by extreme partisan polarization, which transforms political disagreement into zero-sum conflict. The legislature has become so crippled by this gridlock that even basic functions, such as passing appropriations bills to fund the government, are routinely held hostage, leading to repeated government shutdowns.³⁹ In 2023, the House of Representatives struggled to simply elect a speaker, paralyzing its legislative functions for an extended period.²

Politicians are increasingly willing to exploit the letter of constitutional rules in ways that violate their spirit.²¹ This includes the routine use of the Senate filibuster to block legislation, the refusal to hold hearings for judicial nominees from the opposing party, and the launching of impeachments on highly partisan grounds. These tactics, once rare, are becoming standard operating procedure, replacing compromise with obstruction. The Supreme Court's 2024 presidential immunity decision further threatens this balance by potentially shielding a president from accountability for official acts, a move that critics argue confers "near-monarchical power" upon the executive.¹⁷

2.1.4 Indicator 1.4: Non-Politicization of the Civil Service & Security Apparatus

Assessment: At Risk (Score: 6.5/10, Trend: Declining ▼)

The United States has a long-standing tradition of a professional, non-partisan civil service and a military that is subordinate to civilian control and remains outside of politics. This norm is a critical guardrail against the use of state power for partisan ends. However, this norm is now under direct and sustained attack.

A key tactic in the modern authoritarian playbook is to politicize independent institutions by purging officials deemed insufficiently loyal and replacing them with political allies.²² This is often justified by rhetoric that delegitimizes the professional civil service, labeling it a "deep state" that is hostile to the will of the leader.²² The previous administration engaged in such behavior, firing numerous inspectors general—the independent watchdogs within federal agencies—and other officials perceived as disloyal.²⁴ There are ongoing plans and proposals to dismantle civil service protections and enable mass firings of federal employees to be replaced with loyalists.

Furthermore, the use of the military and National Guard for domestic law enforcement roles is a concerning trend. The Brennan Center for Justice has described the use of the National Guard for routine drug raids as an "alarming escalation" that threatens the democratic norm separating military and civilian policing functions.⁵⁰ While the security apparatus itself has not been fully politicized, the combination of loyalty tests for civil servants and the blurring of lines in the use of security forces represents a significant risk to this foundational democratic guardrail.

2.2 Analysis of Civil Liberties and the Public Sphere

This pillar examines the freedoms that allow citizens to debate, organize, and contest power. It includes the freedom of the press, the right to form independent organizations, and freedom from undue state interference in the realms of culture, academia, and personal life.

2.2.1 Indicator 2.1: Freedom of Expression, Press, and Information

Assessment: Contradictory (Score: 7.5/10, Trend: Declining ▼)

The United States continues to have some of the world's strongest legal protections for freedom of expression and the press, enshrined in the First Amendment.²⁶ However, the health of this indicator cannot be judged on legal protections alone. While state censorship is rare, the public sphere is afflicted by a severely degraded information ecosystem, economic hardship for the news industry, and escalating political attacks on journalists.

The primary threat is not direct government censorship but the pollution of the information environment. The digital sphere is saturated with false, misleading, and conspiratorial content spread by both foreign and domestic actors.²⁶ This constitutes a form of "censorship by noise," where reliable, fact-based information is drowned out in a flood of propaganda and disinformation, undermining the public's ability to engage in informed debate—a prerequisite for democratic governance. This tactic is a core component of the modern authoritarian playbook, designed to sow doubt and confusion and insulate leaders from accountability.²² Simultaneously, the free press faces direct threats. In 2024, at least 49 journalists were arrested and 80 were assaulted in the U.S. while doing their jobs.⁵¹ Political leaders have adopted authoritarian rhetoric, labeling news organizations "fake news" and "enemies of the people," which incites hostility and undermines public trust.¹⁸ This is compounded by a dire economic crisis in the news industry. The decline of traditional advertising and subscription models has left many news outlets financially vulnerable, less able to fund resource-intensive investigative journalism, and more susceptible to legal attacks designed to silence them through costly litigation.⁵² The result is a paradoxical situation: formal press freedom remains high, but the practical ability of the press to function as an effective check on power is diminishing.

2.2.2 Indicator 2.2: Associational and Organizational Rights (Civil Society)

Assessment: Robust but Under Pressure (Score: 8.5/10, Trend: Stable —)

American civil society is vibrant, diverse, and highly active. A dense network of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), advocacy groups, and grassroots movements plays

a critical role in policy debates, litigation, and public mobilization.²⁵ Organizations like the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the Brennan Center for Justice are at the forefront of legal and public challenges to actions they view as undermining democratic norms and civil liberties.⁵³ Mass protests and demonstrations remain a common and protected feature of the political landscape, indicating that the fundamental rights to assemble and organize are largely intact.⁵⁵

However, this pillar of democratic resilience is not without its challenges.

Authoritarian-leaning leaders often target civil society as a key threat to their consolidation of power, seeking to defund, delegitimize, and intimidate independent organizations.³³ In the U.S. context, this has manifested in attempts by government actors to use investigations, the cancellation of federal grants, and intimidating rhetoric to pressure organizations into compliance.⁵⁶ Furthermore, proposals to increase taxes on the assets of large foundations could limit a crucial source of funding for civil society actors both domestically and globally.²⁸ While civil society remains a powerful bulwark, it is operating in an increasingly hostile political environment.

2.2.3 Indicator 2.3: Academic and Cultural Freedom

Assessment: Declining (Score: 6.5/10, Trend: Declining ▼)

Academic freedom in the United States is facing a coordinated and politically motivated assault, primarily at the state level. This represents a significant erosion of the principle that schools and universities should be spaces for open inquiry and debate, free from political indoctrination.

Since 2021, a wave of educational "gag orders" has swept through state legislatures. These laws restrict how topics related to race, gender, sexuality, and American history can be taught in K-12 schools and public universities. PEN America estimates that these restrictions have directly affected 1.3 million public school teachers and 100,000 higher education faculty.³⁰ In states like Florida and Texas, these laws have been accompanied by efforts to ban books, defund diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs, and prohibit faculty from "compelling" students to adopt certain beliefs, a vaguely worded standard that can create a chilling effect on classroom discussion of controversial but relevant topics.³⁰

These actions are not isolated but part of a broader political strategy to reshape American education to align with a specific ideology. In Florida, for example, the governor appointed a new, politically aligned board of trustees to take over the progressive New College, with the explicit aim of transforming it into a bastion of conservative thought.⁵⁷ While the U.S. has historically been a refuge for scholars fleeing academic repression elsewhere, it is now experiencing its own significant internal threats to academic freedom, creating a climate of self-censorship and fear among educators.⁵⁸

2.2.4 Indicator 2.4: Protection from Illegitimate State Force & Surveillance

Assessment: Mixed with Significant Areas of Concern (Score: 6.0/10, Trend: Stable —)

This indicator presents a mixed picture. While the U.S. does not engage in the kind of widespread, systematic repression seen in authoritarian states, there are chronic and serious

issues regarding the use of state power, particularly concerning surveillance and the criminal justice system.

In 2024, Congress reauthorized Section 702 of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, a program that permits the warrantless collection of communications of Americans. The program has been described by civil liberties advocates as "rife with abuse," and its reauthorization came without significant reforms to protect privacy.²⁶ The ACLU and other organizations continue to litigate against other forms of government surveillance, such as the warrantless tracking of cell phone location data.³²

The U.S. criminal justice system is a major area of concern. The country's incarceration rate, despite modest declines, remains among the highest in the world, with stark racial disparities; Black and Hispanic individuals are imprisoned at much higher rates than their white counterparts.² Police violence, particularly the use of lethal force against civilians, continues to be a serious problem, with officers rarely facing criminal charges.² While some states have enacted reforms, such as Illinois becoming the first state to abolish cash bail in 2024, the overall system is marked by what Freedom House calls "mistreatment and dysfunction".²

2.3 Analysis of Political Culture and Norms

This pillar assesses the informal "rules of the game"—the shared values, beliefs, and behaviors that underpin a democracy's formal institutions. The erosion of these norms is often the earliest and most telling indicator of democratic backsliding, as it creates the political space for attacks on institutions to occur.

2.3.1 Indicator 3.1: Acceptance of Legitimate Political Opposition

Assessment: Severely Degraded (Score: 4.5/10, Trend: Declining ▼)

The norm of mutual toleration—the idea that political opponents are legitimate adversaries with a right to govern, not treasonous enemies of the state—has been severely degraded in the United States. This is arguably the most critical symptom of democratic decay currently present in the country. The rejection of opponents' legitimacy is a core attribute of authoritarianism, as it frames politics as a battle for survival rather than a competition of ideas.¹⁴

This degradation manifests primarily through political rhetoric. Leaders increasingly employ language that casts opponents as corrupt, un-American, and an existential threat to the nation.¹⁸ This includes labeling the press as "enemies of the people" and political rivals as "traitors." This is not a symmetrical phenomenon of rising incivility. While political polarization involves mutual dislike and distrust from both sides, the specific anti-democratic behavior of systematically denying the legitimacy of the electoral process and of political opponents is disproportionately associated with one side of the political spectrum in the current American context.⁴ To frame this issue as a simple case of "both sides are polarized" would be to create a false equivalence and miss the specific, targeted nature of the attack on this fundamental democratic norm. This shift from a politics of adversaries to a politics of enemies erodes the potential for compromise and transforms every political contest into a high-stakes conflict where losing is seen as unacceptable.³³

2.3.2 Indicator 3.2: Rejection of Political Violence

Assessment: Declining (Score: 5.5/10, Trend: Declining ▼)

Forbearance, the norm of refraining from actions that, while technically legal, would violate the spirit of the political system, is closely tied to the rejection of violence as a political tool. In recent years, this norm has weakened significantly, with an increasing tolerance and even encouragement of political violence.

The most stark example of this was the January 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol, an act of political violence intended to disrupt the peaceful transfer of power.² Beyond this single event, there has been a proliferation of threats and intimidation targeting elected officials, judges, and, most notably, local election administrators.² This trend aligns with the authoritarian playbook, in which leaders tolerate or actively stoke violence by their supporters to create an atmosphere of fear, intimidate opponents, and demonstrate strength.¹⁴ While most political leaders formally condemn violence, the use of inflammatory rhetoric that dehumanizes opponents can create a permission structure for their supporters to engage in harassment and physical attacks.

2.3.3 Indicator 3.3: Equal Protection & Minority Rights

Assessment: Under Pressure, with Backsliding in Some Areas (Score: 6.0/10, Trend: Declining ▼)

While the U.S. has a legal framework designed to protect against discrimination, the real-world application of these protections is uneven, and minority groups continue to face significant disparities and targeted political attacks. Human Rights Watch identified racial justice as a "pressing human rights concern" in the U.S. in 2024, noting that the country has done too little to implement the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.³⁵

Stark economic disparities persist. The racial wealth gap has remained largely unchanged for 50 years, with Black families holding just 24 cents for every dollar of white family wealth.⁶⁰ The National Urban League's 2024 State of Black America report assigned a score of just under 76% to the current level of equality between Black and White Americans, citing significant gaps in income and other economic indicators.⁶¹

These structural inequalities are compounded by policies that have a disproportionate impact on minority communities. This includes restrictive voting laws that create higher barriers for minority voters, abusive border policies targeting migrants and asylum seekers, and new threats to LGBTQ rights at the state level.² The scapegoating of immigrants and other minority groups as the source of national problems is a central tactic of modern authoritarian movements and is a prominent feature of the current political discourse in the U.S.²² This rhetoric not only harms the targeted groups but also erodes the democratic principle of equal citizenship for all.

2.3.4 Indicator 3.4: Public Trust in Democratic Processes

Assessment: Critically Low and Declining (Score: 4.0/10, Trend: Declining ▼)

Public trust in the fairness and efficacy of democratic institutions is at a historic nadir. This widespread cynicism is a profound vulnerability, as it makes the populace more susceptible to anti-democratic and populist appeals that promise to sweep away a "corrupt" system. Survey data paints a grim picture. A 2024 Pew Research Center poll found that 72% of Americans believe the U.S. *used to be* a good example of democracy but no longer is.³⁸ A record 80% of U.S. adults believe Americans are greatly divided on the most important values.⁶³ This is not just a feeling of division, but a deep-seated distrust in institutions. Trust in the federal government in Washington remains near historic lows, with only 18% of Americans saying they trust it to do what is right most of the time.³⁹ As noted previously, trust in the judicial system has hit a record low.⁴⁸

This distrust is heavily polarized. There are sharp partisan divides in confidence that votes will be counted accurately and in trust of major news sources.⁶² This fracturing of shared reality makes it nearly impossible to build the consensus needed to address major national problems. This crisis of faith is a direct consequence of the erosion in other indicators: when citizens see a political system paralyzed by gridlock (1.3), dominated by money (3.1), and animated by a politics of enmity (3.1), their trust naturally collapses. This creates a dangerous feedback loop, where low trust empowers leaders who further attack democratic norms, leading to even greater public cynicism.⁶³

Part III: Systemic Pressures and Institutional Resilience

The symptoms of democratic ill-health detailed in Part II are not random occurrences. They are driven by deep, systemic pressures that have been building for decades. This section analyzes three of the most powerful of these forces: the role of money in politics, the transformative impact of the digital sphere, and the consequences of profound socio-economic divides.

3.1 The Role of Money and Influence

The influence of money in American politics has become a primary driver of institutional dysfunction and public distrust. The current campaign finance system fundamentally undermines the democratic principle of political equality—one person, one vote—by creating a system in which wealth confers disproportionate political influence. This reality fuels the widespread public perception that the government is responsive not to ordinary citizens, but to wealthy donors and special interests.³⁷

The scale of political spending is staggering. The 2024 election cycle broke all previous records. Presidential candidates raised over \$2 billion, while congressional candidates raised \$3.8 billion. Political Action Committees (PACs) raised an astronomical \$15.7 billion.⁶⁶ This firehose of cash is increasingly dominated by a tiny sliver of the population. The Brennan Center for Justice reports that the 2024 election saw more money than ever coming from the wealthiest megadonors, who spent tens of millions through Super PACs to boost their preferred candidates, dwarfing the contributions of small donors.⁶⁷ This dynamic nationalizes congressional races, making candidates more beholden to out-of-state donors and national

interest groups than to their own constituents.⁶⁷

Compounding the problem is a lack of transparency. The rise of "dark money"—spending from groups that do not disclose their donors—makes it impossible for the public to know who is attempting to influence their vote. This problem is particularly acute in the realm of online political advertising, where disclosure rules are notoriously weak.⁶⁷ This system of legalized, semi-secret influence peddling is corrosive. It creates opportunities for corruption, allows powerful interests to block popular reforms, and confirms the public's most cynical beliefs about their government, directly feeding the collapse in trust documented in Indicator 3.4.

3.2 The Digital Sphere: Mobilization vs. Fragmentation

Digital technology, particularly social media, has become a central and transformative force in American politics. It is a profoundly double-edged sword, acting as both a powerful tool for democratic mobilization and a potent vector for disinformation, polarization, and social fragmentation.

On one hand, social media has democratized political communication. Campaigns can now bypass traditional media gatekeepers to speak directly to voters, raise funds, and organize supporters.⁶⁸ Different platforms are used to target different demographics: campaigns use TikTok and Instagram to reach younger voters with interactive content, while platforms like Truth Social are used to energize a core base with unfiltered messages.⁶⁹ This has the potential to increase engagement and bring new voices into the political process.

On the other hand, the very architecture of these platforms appears to be damaging to democratic health. Their business models, which prioritize engagement, often amplify sensational, divisive, and false content. This creates echo chambers that reinforce existing beliefs and limit exposure to diverse perspectives, contributing directly to affective polarization.⁶³ The U.S. is a global outlier in its negative perception of social media's impact; a majority of Americans, including 74% of Republicans and 57% of Democrats, believe it has been a bad thing for democracy.⁶² The advent of generative artificial intelligence adds a dangerous new dimension, with campaigns already using AI-generated images to attack opponents, a practice that further erodes the shared factual reality necessary for democratic debate.⁶⁸

3.3 Socio-Economic Divides and Political Trust

The political strains on American democracy are inextricably linked to deep, long-term socio-economic trends. Decades of rising economic inequality, the stagnation of wages for many, and the erosion of social mobility have created a fertile ground for political discontent, polarization, and distrust.

As noted earlier, wealth and income inequality in the U.S. are extremely high compared to other developed nations, and the racial wealth gap has remained stubbornly wide for half a century.⁶⁰ This economic reality clashes with the American ideal of a meritocracy where anyone can succeed. As scholars like Michael Sandel have argued, this has led to a dangerous sorting of society into "winners" and "losers" of globalization, where the successful feel they deserve their success and the left-behind feel resentful and forgotten.⁶³

This sense of grievance and economic dislocation is a powerful driver of polarization. Political identity becomes fused with social and economic identity, and political opponents are seen as representing a threat to one's way of life.⁶³ This dynamic is a common precursor to democratic backsliding globally. The failure of mainstream democratic institutions to deliver adequate socioeconomic goods and security for large segments of the population can lead voters to abandon them in favor of populist, anti-establishment leaders who promise to burn down the existing system.⁶⁵ The erosion of trust in the U.S. is therefore not just a political phenomenon; it is rooted in the lived economic experience of millions of citizens who feel the system is no longer working for them.

Part IV: Pathways and Prognosis

This final section synthesizes the findings from the diagnostic assessment to provide a forward-looking analysis of the state of American democracy. It identifies the most critical systemic vulnerabilities, evaluates the remaining sources of institutional and societal resilience, and offers strategic recommendations for democratic strengthening.

4.1 Identifying Critical Vulnerabilities

The most acute vulnerability facing American democracy is the dangerous feedback loop created by the convergence of three trends identified in this report: the collapse of public trust in democratic processes (Indicator 3.4), the rejection of the legitimacy of political opposition (Indicator 3.1), and the escalating politicization of foundational institutions (Pillar I). The process of this feedback loop is clear. When a large segment of the public loses faith in the fairness of the system—believing elections are rigged, courts are biased, and the government is corrupt—they become receptive to leaders who reflect and amplify this cynicism.⁶⁵ These leaders then employ rhetoric that casts their political opponents not as legitimate adversaries but as existential, illegitimate enemies responsible for the system's failures.³⁴ This demonization, in turn, creates a political permission structure for those leaders to attack the very institutions designed to constrain them—the courts, the electoral system, the non-partisan civil service—framing these attacks as a necessary crusade against a corrupt "establishment" or "deep state".²² Each successful attack on an institution further validates public cynicism, which empowers the anti-democratic leaders to escalate their attacks, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of decay. This is the core dynamic of democratic backsliding observed globally, and the evidence presented in this report suggests this dynamic is active and accelerating in the United States.

4.2 Sources of Resilience

Despite these severe stresses, the U.S. system retains significant, though finite, sources of resilience that have thus far prevented a more rapid or complete democratic breakdown. First, while the Supreme Court has become a locus of political conflict, the broader federal judiciary has, at times, served as a crucial check. Lower courts, including many judges appointed by Republican presidents, have repeatedly ruled against executive overreach and attempts to subvert electoral processes, demonstrating a lingering commitment to the rule of

law over partisan loyalty.²

Second, American civil society remains exceptionally robust and mobilized. A diverse ecosystem of legal organizations, advocacy groups, and grassroots movements is actively engaged in litigation, public education, and organizing to counter democratic erosion.⁵⁵ This active, watchful civil society serves as a powerful counterweight to authoritarian tendencies. Third, the federalist structure of the U.S. government, while a source of fragmentation, also provides resilience. The "laboratories of democracy" at the state level allow for divergent paths. While some states are enacting restrictive laws that erode democratic access, others are simultaneously passing expansive voting reforms and strengthening democratic guardrails, providing potential models for future national reform.⁴⁰

Finally, while public trust in institutions is low, political engagement and participation have seen an unexpected rise in recent years.⁶² The EIU notes that this is a global trend, suggesting that even as citizens lose faith in formal institutions, "the democratic spirit remains alive in grassroots movements".⁷⁰ This energy, if channeled constructively, represents a powerful potential for democratic renewal.

4.3 Strategic Recommendations for Democratic Strengthening

The diagnosis of a system suffering from the erosion of norms, the politicization of institutions, and a collapse in public trust points toward a clear set of strategic priorities. Recommendations must focus on depoliticizing core state functions, rebuilding a shared factual basis for public debate, and addressing the root causes of citizen alienation.

- 1. Depoliticize Foundational Institutions:** The highest priority must be to insulate the core machinery of democracy from partisan warfare. This includes federal legislation to set national standards for election administration that protect against partisan interference; the enactment of a binding, enforceable ethics code for the U.S. Supreme Court to restore its legitimacy; and the strengthening of civil service protections to prevent politically motivated purges of the federal workforce.
- 2. Combat Disinformation and Rebuild the Public Sphere:** The health of the public sphere must be treated as a critical infrastructure issue. This requires a multi-pronged approach: enacting robust transparency laws for all online political advertising to expose "dark money"⁶⁷; providing public and philanthropic support for independent, local journalism to rebuild community-level trust⁵²; and investing heavily in media literacy education to equip citizens with the skills to navigate a polluted information environment.
- 3. Bridge Partisan Divides at the Grassroots:** While national-level polarization is intractable in the short term, research suggests that inter-group dialogue and collaboration on tangible, local problems can effectively reduce affective polarization.⁶³ Public and private investment should be directed toward scaling up civic organizations that specialize in this work, rebuilding social trust from the community level up.
- 4. Address the Root Causes of Economic Discontent:** Democratic stability is difficult to maintain amidst extreme economic inequality and insecurity. Long-term democratic health requires pursuing economic policies that reduce the vast disparities in wealth

and opportunity, strengthen the social safety net, and provide greater economic security for all citizens. Addressing these underlying grievances can lessen the appeal of populist demagogues who exploit economic anxiety to undermine democratic institutions.⁶³

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