

American Democracy: A Traditional Assessment.

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As an American student with a traditional historical perspective, what do you believe are the “pros and cons” of a democratic system of government?



The Framework: Four Cons, Four Pros

As a student of American history, I look at and evaluate our democracy the way the Framers themselves did: through both a positive and negative lens, weighing the same tensions they debated at the Constitutional Convention. The Cons examine the structural failures of American democracy, such as the polarization of the population and political violence. Whereas the pros emphasize its foundational strengths such as universal suffrage and peaceful transitions. Together, they reveal a system under serious stress but not beyond repair.

The Cons

- Partisan Polarization
- Legislative Gridlock
- Corruption & Eroding Trust
- Political Violence

The Pros

- Universal Suffrage
- Peaceful Transitions of Power
- Civic Engagement
- Constitutional Protections

Partisan Polarization Divides the Country

America as a whole has become deeply fractured. Madison warned in Federalist No. 10 that guarding against the "mischiefs of faction" was democracy's central design problem; the numbers below show how far that danger has advanced. The Pew Research Center's 2026 Political Typology acknowledges and identifies nine unique ideological groups, demonstrating that even within parties Americans hold complex and differing values. Ultimately, however the consequences are measurable and quite severe.

69%

Republicans Seen as Extreme

of Democrats say Republicans go "too far" in using inflammatory rhetoric

60%

Democrats Seen as Extreme

of Republicans say Democrats go "too far" in inflammatory criticism

45%

Political Independents

of Americans identified as independents in 2025, a record high

65%

Politically Exhausted

of Americans "always or often feel exhausted" thinking about politics



Only **10%** of Americans feel hopeful about the political system . This quantifies the danger of polarization.



Legislative Paralysis

The checks and balances system were designed with the prevention of tyranny in mind, however the side effect is they have produced governmental paralysis. Even unified government has failed to deliver results. Madison's Federalist No. 51 argued that ambition must be made to counteract ambition; he did not foresee how thoroughly that friction could grind governance itself to a halt.

118th Congress (2023–2024)

Enacted **fewer than 210 bills** over two years. Significant as it is among the lowest totals in modern history.

2025: A Governing Trifecta

Despite Republican control of both chambers and the White House, the House cast just **362 votes**, the fewest of any first year this century. Fewer than **40 bills** reached the president's desk in his first year.

Structural Obstacles

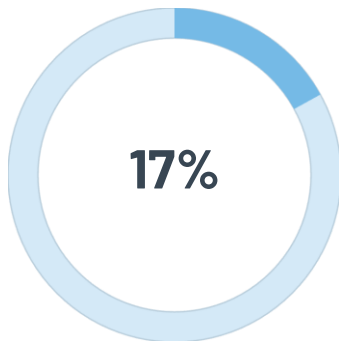
- **The Rule:** Requires 60 Senate votes for most legislation, enabling a minority to block popular bills
- **Government Shutdown:** A 43-day shutdown in 2025 became the **longest in American history**
- **Unified Government ≠ Productivity:** Single-party control has not translated into legislative output



The system designed to protect against tyranny now routinely prevents governance.

Corruption and the Collapse of Public Trust

Additionally, the United States has fallen to its lowest-ever ranking in the Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index. This is a major indicator of the institutional decay that is inherently correlated with a collapse in public confidence. The Framers built impeachment and separation of powers specifically to check this kind of decay; those tools only work if the political will exists to use them.

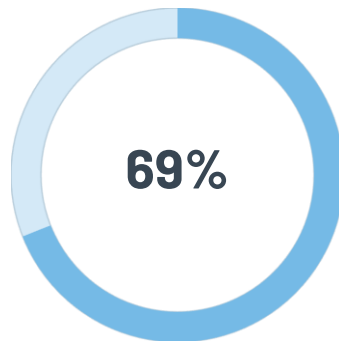


Trust in Government

of Americans trust the federal government to do what is right.
Down from 54% in October 2001

Corruption Perceptions Index

The U.S. ranked **29th out of 182 countries** in 2025 with a score of 64/100, a decently sized drop from 75/100 in 2017. During the Obama years (2012–2016), the U.S. averaged 74 points and ranked between 15th and 19th.



Dissatisfied with Democracy

of U.S. adults are dissatisfied
Comparison: Far higher than Canada (43%), Germany (40%), or Sweden (24%)

Democracy Meter

The Century Foundation's 2025 Democracy Meter rated the U.S. at just **57/100**, a 28% drop from the prior year. Experts warn of "grand corruption" and systematic targeting of political critics.

Democratic Leaders and the Rise of Political Violence

Political violence has become a **growing and bipartisan concern**. High-profile assassinations and attacks on elected officials have heightened fears that democratic competition is increasingly turning deadly. Fear of exactly this kind of unrest, most famously Shays' Rebellion, is part of what drove the Framers to Philadelphia in 1787 in the first place.

85% Believe Violence Is Rising

A Pew survey found near-identical shares of Republicans (86%) and Democrats (85%) agree that politically motivated violence is increasing. This is indicative that this is a major issue through the rare bipartisan consensus.

Over 3,500 Killed Since 1975

More than 3,500 people have been killed in politically motivated terrorist attacks in the U.S. since 1975.

Rising Support for Violence

Support for political violence among left-leaning Americans rose **9% to 26%** in 2025, while right-leaning support stood at 17%. More than half of Americans see both left-wing (53%) and right-wing (52%) extremism as major problems.

Each Citizen Has a Vote

American democracy's greatest strength is its universal suffrage, which is the principal that every single citizen has a voice in choosing who represents them. The government derives its legitimacy from the consent of the governed, which is a principle that was rooted in the American founding and is continuously reaffirmed in every election. The Framers themselves limited the vote to property-owning white men; every expansion since, to laborers, women, Black Americans, and 18-year-olds, has been an argument about what "consent of the governed" really requires.

65.3%

2024 Turnout

of voting-age citizens cast ballots ≈ 154 million people, the third-highest in 34 years

66%

2020 Turnout

the highest voter participation rate since 1908.



Peaceful Transitions of Power and Accountability

In spite of its flaws, American democracy provides an essential feature of regular, peaceful elections which ultimately allow citizens to replace leaders who fail to serve the public interest or are unable to run anymore. Elections are free which allows the people to vote with their best interest in mind. George Washington set this precedent himself, voluntarily stepping down after two terms when he could have held power indefinitely.

The 2024 election proved genuine electoral accountability; shown through a higher share of Trump's 2020 voters turning out than Biden's (to vote for Kamala), and Trump also won a higher share of those who had not voted in the previous election, ultimately showing that elections are the result of shifts in voter preference.



The system's built-in mechanism for removing leaders without violence remains a critical safeguard against authoritarianism. One that many nations lack entirely.

Why This Matters

Peaceful transfer of power is not guaranteed globally. In 2024, only a fraction of the world's nations held genuinely free elections. The American system, however imperfect, enforces this mechanism.

Civic Engagement and Political Participation

American democracy has fostered unusually high levels of political engagement. Alexis de Tocqueville marveled at this in the 1830s, arguing that Americans' habit of forming voluntary associations was democracy's real safeguard, not just its laws. Recent research shows that Americans **"are the most educated in their nation's history"** and **"more interested in politics, have greater access to information, and are more politically active than any prior electorate."**



Voter Registration

The 2024 election saw **73.6%** of the citizen voting-age population registered to vote, per the Census Bureau. A separate federal count, the EAC's active-registration rolls, puts it even higher, at **86.6%** of all eligible citizens, a remarkable baseline for participation.



Beyond the Ballot

Americans participate in **protests, local governance, and civic organizations** at levels that reflect a robust civil society.



Information Access

Greater access to information and political education means the electorate is **better equipped to hold power accountable** than at any prior point in American history.

Constitutional Protections and the Path Forward

Institutional Safeguards

American democracy is anchored in constitutional guarantees, **freedom of speech, press, assembly, and religion**, that protect minority views and individual rights against majority tyranny. Madison drafted these into the Bill of Rights precisely because he feared what an unchecked majority could do to a minority. The majority of Americans believe these freedoms **"are key to America's success."**

- Independent courts as a check on executive overreach
- A free press that holds power accountable
- Federalism that distributes authority across levels of government

The Verdict

American democracy faces **profound structural challenges**, polarization, gridlock, corruption, and violence are real and worsening. Yet its institutional framework provides checks on power that many nations lack, and its foundational mechanisms, voting, accountability, civic participation, constitutional rights, remain intact.

I believe the system is not failing because democracy is flawed; it is failing because citizens and leaders have not adequately defended it. The pros are not guarantees, they are **tools that require active use**.

- ❏ **Key Takeaway:** The strengths of American democracy are real but conditional. Universal suffrage, peaceful transitions, civic engagement, and constitutional protections are not self-sustaining, rather they require an informed, engaged citizenry to function as intended.