

The U.S. is No Longer a Full Democracy. What Happened?

By Shikha Sharma



The Economist's internationally accepted democracy index has recently reflected that the United States has relinquished its democratic excellence to a number of countries, including Mauritius and Uruguay. After 228 years of priding itself on its 'Full Democracy' status since the ratification of the Constitution in 1789, the United States experiences its first year bearing the 'Flawed Democracy' name in 2017.

How is democracy measured and Why Does it Matter?

According to the Economist Intelligence Unit's (EIU) Democracy Index, five categories are used to measure democracy:

- Electoral process and pluralism
- Civil liberties
- The functioning of the government

- Political participation
- Political culture

But the EIU sums up its aggregate scoring of the Democracy Index in a conclusion that citizen's trust in the United States' government has reached an all time low. It's strongly believed that this erosion of trust is due to people's recognition of the government being run on the interest of a few and capitalistically-motivated. This is supported by a 2014 Princeton University report that concluded that between 1981 and 2002 the US has steadily shifted "from democratic to oligarchical," based on the fact that "economic elites and organized groups 'representing business interests' have a disproportionate impact on federal policymaking."

Should the slow rise of business interest representation in Washington have been a more alarming forewarning that our democracy would be compromised in the coming years? It is hard to say. But it is clear that this arresting new status should awaken the democratic fire that existed when the Sons of Liberty threw over 300 boxes of tea in the Boston Harbor to demonstrate their dissent of unwanted taxes.

In fact, there has been an exponential rise in the political and civic participation in protests against the new administration. But it is important to distinguish that the reason that our democratic status has been downgraded is not necessarily a result of the new administration, since our status has been steadily declining for several years.

However, the new administration has demonstrated that something does not sit well with the people, and the people are voicing their own dissent- surely adding to our regressing democracy score in the coming years.

With a cabinet that maintains one of the highest donor-to-placed in the executive cabinet ratios of all time, can we really be shocked that our representatives are not representing our best interests, as a true democratic republic would? The people who Donald Trump placed in high government official positioned averaged more than \$800,000 per donor and were not necessarily qualified for the job. Exhibit A: Betsy DeVos, billionaire Secretary of Education with no experience in managing billion-dollar budgets or financial aid, donated over \$900,000 to Trump's campaign, "[expected] a return on [her] investment," and had never once had leadership positions in public schools or managed a financial aid budget. Paid to get in- check. Objectively and severely

unqualified- check. It is fair to expect that this fiasco will be adding to our democracy losses for the 2017 Democracy index.

How Does the U.S. Meet the Criteria for a Flawed Democracy?

The EUI puts forth several criteria that if met, qualify a country for a flawed-democracy status. Let's see how the U.S. fares.

Free and Fair Elections

Though the antiquated Electoral College system can be improved, the U.S. had a bureaucratically peaceful transfer of power in addition to a free and fair election. And though the Trump administration has been accused of allowing Russia to influence the elections, the case is on a trial. So far, we meet this criterion of a flawed democracy.

Even if there are problems (such as infringements on media freedom), are the basic civil liberties are respected?

This can be a debate on its own. The rate of "stop and frisks" on innocent citizens in the African American community exponentially exceeds that of any other communities, suggesting that their basic civil liberties (among others) are comparatively and objectively not respected. But taking the "even if there are problems" clause with a large grain of salt, we accept basic civil liberties respected as met in the criteria for a flawed democracy.

Are there are significant weaknesses in other aspects of democracy, including problems in governance, an underdeveloped political culture and low levels of political participation?

55.4% of eligible voters did not even vote in the 2016 Trump-Clinton election, one of the most contentious elections in history. This confirms our low levels of political participation and brings up the question- why? Is it the case that people know that their vote does not actually matter? Or the case that regardless of who takes the presidency, our checks and balances are so strong in the United States, that our democracy would never take a hit? Whatever the case, the low political participation sadly meets the criteria for the definition of a flawed democracy.

All criteria are met for the United States' eligibility for a flawed democracy.

There's No Way that The U.S. CAN'T Be a Full Democracy, Right?

According to the Economist, the declining trust levels in the government, even before the Trump administration took office, have affected how the U.S. fared on the democracy scale. However, if we pull apart the EIU definition of a Full Democracy, it becomes increasingly clear that the new administration consistently violates each and every clause of the Full Democracy, quoted below.

"Countries in which not only basic political freedoms and civil liberties are respected."

We already have a problem with the executive order banning travel from 7 Muslim majority countries. It is a violation of the 14th amendment, especially the Equal Protection Clause; freedom of religion; the fact that our immigration laws don't even allow for visa discrimination, Family Reunification Rights. That is strike one, but this was an anomaly and it's being highly judicially contested, right? Next?

"Media are independent and diverse."

Okay, so Trump has systematically accused the media of omission of terrorist attacks, legitimate news sources as being “fake news,” and tweeting that any negative polls about him are “fake news.” This one is pretty bad. Yes, we have quite the diverse and independent media, which ironically allows us to function in the post-fact political world to which Trump refers. However, when the president himself accuses legitimate news sources as being “fake,” he denounces the facts that inform people of what happens in Washington (our democratic entry to what is actually a republic). Control of the media starts with a leader’s own propaganda. By Trump tweeting that any negative polls about him are “fake news,” we are reminded of why Fidel Castro had an 80% approval rating. So if our political freedoms and civil liberties are not being respected, and we are being propagandistically told to not believe the media, at least we have our upstanding judiciary independence, right? *Donald Trump Voice* Wrong.

“The judiciary is independent and judicial decisions are enforced”

Donald Trump literally fired Sally Yates, Attorney General, after she claimed that his Muslim Ban executive order was unconstitutional.

The United States unfortunately has violated the terms that qualify a country for ‘full democracy’ status.

What Do We Make of this new ‘Flawed Democracy Title’?

Here we have it. In the fledgling days of his presidency, Donald Trump has managed to undermine each and every pillar of our great nation’s democracy. The irony of what was once the greatest democracy on earth being distorted by

one man or the values on which we founded this country (that being a nation founded for refugees and immigrants fleeing religious persecution) truly stings. The release of the EIU's democracy index revealing the United State's downgrade to a flawed democracy comes at a time when there is much to fight for. It has clarified the true corruption in our government and the limitations of our checks and balances that we have been misguided to believe were robust. With this new confirmed knowledge we must move forward with skepticism of the intentions of our new administration, our fiery will to resist, and hope to take back our full democracy.

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