

FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2019



This report was made possible by the generous support of the Achelis & Bodman Foundation, the Jyllands-Posten Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the William & Sheila Konar Foundation, the Lilly Endowment, and the Fritt Ord Foundation.

Freedom House is solely responsible for the report's content.

Freedom in the World 2019

Table of Contents

Democracy in Retreat	1
<i>Freedom in the World</i> Methodology	2
Unpacking 13 Years of Decline	4
Regional Trends	9
<i>Freedom in the World 2019</i> Map	14
Countries in the Spotlight	16
The Struggle Comes Home: Attacks on Democracy in the United States	18
The United States in Decline	23
Recommendations for Democracies	26
Recommendations for the Private Sector	28

The following people were instrumental in the writing of this booklet: Christopher Brandt, Isabel Linzer, Shannon O'Toole, Arch Puddington, Sarah Repucci, Tyler Roylance, Nate Schenckan, Adrian Shahbaz, Amy Slipowitz, and Caitlin Watson.

This booklet is a summary of findings for the 2019 edition of *Freedom in the World*. The complete analysis, including narrative reports on all countries and territories, can be found on our website at www.freedomhouse.org.

ON THE COVER

Cover image by KAL.

Democracy in Retreat

In 2018, *Freedom in the World* recorded the 13th consecutive year of decline in global freedom. The reversal has spanned a variety of countries in every region, from long-standing democracies like the United States to consolidated authoritarian regimes like China and Russia. The overall losses are still shallow compared with the gains of the late 20th century, but the pattern is consistent and ominous. Democracy is in retreat.

In states that were already authoritarian, earning Not Free designations from Freedom House, governments have increasingly shed the thin façade of democratic practice that they established in previous decades, when international incentives and pressure for reform were stronger. More authoritarian powers are now banning opposition groups or jailing their leaders, dispensing with term limits, and tightening the screws on any independent media that remain. Meanwhile, many countries that democratized after the end of the Cold War have regressed in the face of rampant corruption, antiliberal populist movements, and breakdowns in the rule of law. Most troublingly, even long-standing democracies have been shaken by populist political forces that reject basic principles like the separation of powers and target minorities for discriminatory treatment.

Some light shined through these gathering clouds in 2018. Surprising improvements in individual countries—including Malaysia, Armenia, Ethiopia, Angola, and Ecuador—show that democracy has enduring appeal as a means of holding leaders accountable and creating the conditions for a better life. Even in the countries of Europe and North America where democratic institutions are under pressure, dynamic civic movements for justice and inclusion continue to build

on the achievements of their predecessors, expanding the scope of what citizens can and should expect from democracy. The promise of democracy remains real and powerful. Not only defending it but broadening its reach is one of the great causes of our time.

The wave of democratization rolls back

The end of the Cold War accelerated a dramatic wave of democratization that began as early as the 1970s. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991 cleared the way for the formation or restoration of liberal democratic institutions not only in Eastern Europe, but also in the Americas, sub-Saharan Africa, and Asia. Between 1988 and 2005, the percentage of countries ranked Not Free in *Freedom in the World* dropped by almost 14 points (from 37 to 23 percent), while the share of Free countries grew (from 36 to 46 percent). This surge of progress has now begun to roll back. Between 2005 and 2018, the share of Not Free countries rose to 26 percent, while the share of Free countries declined to 44 percent.

The reversals may be a result of the euphoric expansion of the 1990s and early 2000s. As that momentum has worn off, many countries have struggled to accommodate the political swings and contentious debates intrinsic to democracy. Rapidly erected democratic

Freedom in the World methodology

Freedom in the World 2019 evaluates the state of freedom in 195 countries and 14 territories during calendar year 2018. Each country and territory is assigned between 0 and 4 points on a series of 25 indicators, for an aggregate score of up to 100. These scores are used to determine two numerical ratings, for political rights and civil liberties, with a rating of 1 representing the most free conditions and 7 the least free. A country or territory's political rights and civil liberties ratings then determine whether it has an overall status of Free, Partly Free, or Not Free.

The methodology, which is derived from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is applied to all countries and territories, irrespective of geographic location, ethnic or religious composition, or level of economic development.

Freedom in the World assesses the real-world rights and freedoms enjoyed by individuals, rather than governments or government performance per se. Political rights and civil liberties can be affected by both state and nonstate actors, including insurgents and other armed groups.

For complete information on the methodology, visit <https://freedomhouse.org/report/methodology-freedom-world-2019>.

institutions have come under sustained attack in nations that remain economically fragile or are still riven by deep-seated class or ethnic conflicts. Of the 23 countries that suffered a negative status change over the past 13 years (moving from Free to Partly Free, or Partly Free to Not Free), almost two-thirds (61 percent) had earned a positive status change after 1988. For example, Hungary, which became Free in 1990, fell back to Partly Free this year after five consecutive years of decline and 13 years without improvement.

An ebb tide in established democracies

With the post-Cold War transition period now over, another shift in the global order is challenging long-standing democracies, from within and without. A crisis of confidence in these societies has intensified, with many citizens expressing doubts that democracy still serves their interests. Of the 41 countries that were consistently ranked Free from 1985 to 2005, 22 have registered net score declines in the last five years.

The crisis is linked to a changing balance of power at the global level. The share of international power held by highly industrialized democracies is dwindling as the clout of China, India, and other newly industrialized economies increases. China's rise is the most stunning, with GDP per capita increasing by 16 times from 1990 to 2017. The shift has been driven by a new phase of globalization that unlocked enormous wealth around the world. The distribution of benefits has been highly uneven, however, with most accruing to either the wealthiest on a global scale or to workers in industrializing countries. Low- and medium-skilled

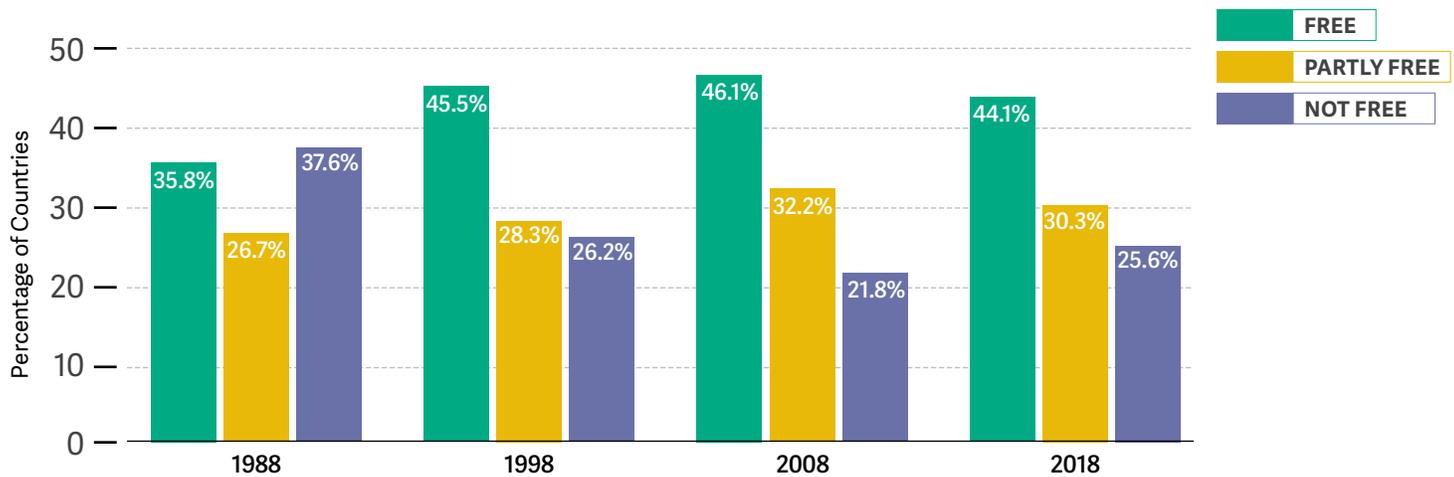
workers in long-industrialized democracies have gained relatively little from the expansion, as stable, well-paying jobs have been lost to a combination of foreign competition and technological change.

These developments have contributed to increasing anger and anxiety in Europe and the United States over economic inequality and loss of personal status. The center of the political spectrum, which dominated politics in the established democracies as the changes unfolded, failed to adequately address the disruption and dislocation they caused. This created political opportunities for new competitors on the left and right, who were able to cast existing elites as complicit in or benefiting from the erosion of citizens' living standards and national traditions.

So far it has been antiliberal populist movements of the far right—those that emphasize national sovereignty, are hostile to immigration, and reject constitutional checks on the will of the majority—that have been most effective at seizing the open political space. In countries from Italy to Sweden, antiliberal politicians have shifted the terms of debate and won elections by promoting an exclusionary national identity as a means for frustrated majorities to gird themselves against a changing global and domestic order. By building alliances with or outright capturing mainstream parties on the right, antiliberals have been able to launch attacks on the institutions designed to protect minorities against abuses and prevent monopolization of power. Victories for antiliberal movements in Europe and the United States in recent years have emboldened their counterparts around

FREEDOM IN THE BALANCE

While past years saw gains in global freedom, in the last decade the share of Not Free countries rose to nearly 26 percent, and the share of Free countries declined to 44 percent.



the world, as seen most recently in the election of Jair Bolsonaro as president of Brazil.

These movements damage democracies internally through their dismissive attitude toward core civil and political rights, and they weaken the cause of democracy around the world with their unilateralist reflexes. For example, antiliberal leaders' attacks on the media have contributed to increasing polarization of the press, including political control over state broadcasters, and to growing physical threats against journalists in their countries. At the same time, such attacks have provided cover for authoritarian leaders abroad, who now commonly cry "fake news" when squelching critical coverage.

Similarly, punitive approaches to immigration are resulting in human rights abuses by democracies—such as Australia's indefinite confinement of seaborne migrants in squalid camps on the remote island of Nauru, the separation of migrant children from their detained parents by the United States, or the detention of migrants by Libyan militias at the behest of Italy—that in turn offer excuses for more aggressive policies towards migrants and refugees elsewhere in the world. Populist politicians' appeals to "unique" or "traditional" national values in democracies threaten the protection of individual rights as a universal value, which allows authoritarian states to justify much more egregious human rights violations. And by unilaterally assailing international institutions like the United Nations or the International Criminal Court without putting forward serious alternatives, antiliberal

governments weaken the capacity of the international system to constrain the behavior of China and other authoritarian powers.

The gravity of the threat to global freedom requires the United States to shore up and expand its alliances with fellow democracies and deepen its own commitment to the values they share. Only a united front among the world's democratic nations—and a defense of democracy as a universal right rather than the historical inheritance of a few Western societies—can roll back the world's current authoritarian and antiliberal trends. By contrast, a withdrawal of the United States from global engagement on behalf of democracy, and a shift to transactional or mercenary relations with allies and rivals alike, will only accelerate the decline of democratic norms.

The costs of faltering leadership

There should be no illusions about what the deterioration of established democracies could mean for the cause of freedom globally. Neither America nor its most powerful allies have ever been perfect models—the United States ranks behind 51 of the 87 other Free countries in *Freedom in the World*—and their commitment to democratic governance overseas has always competed with other priorities. But the post-Soviet wave of democratization did produce lasting gains and came in no small part because of support and encouragement from the United States and other leading democratic nations. Despite the regression in many newly democratized countries described above, two-thirds of the countries whose

Unpacking 13 Years of Decline

Freedom in the World has recorded global declines in political rights and civil liberties for an alarming 13 consecutive years, from 2005 to 2018. The global average score has declined each year, and countries with net score declines have consistently outnumbered those with net improvements.

- **A widespread problem:** The 13 years of decline have touched all parts of the world and affected Free, Partly Free, and Not Free countries alike. Every region except Asia-Pacific has a lower average score for 2018 than it did in 2005, and even Asia declined when countries with less than 1 million people—mostly small Pacific Island states—are excluded. Not Free countries as a group suffered a more significant score drop than Free or Partly Free countries, which also declined.
- **Faltering post–Cold War democratization:** The end of the Cold War facilitated a wave of democratization in the late 20th century, but a large share of countries that made progress during that time were unable to maintain it. On average, countries that earned a status upgrade—from Not Free to Partly Free, or Partly Free to Free—between 1988 and 2005 have faced an 11 percent drop in their numerical score during the 13 years of decline. The backsliding in these countries outpaces the decline of all global scores on average, demonstrating the particular vulnerability of countries whose democratic institutions have shallow roots. The group faced its most acute losses in the Rule of Law subcategory (15 percent), closely followed by Functioning of Government (14 percent).
- **Consolidated democracies slip:** Social and economic changes related to globalization have contributed to a crisis of confidence in the political systems of long-standing democracies. The democratic erosion seen among Free countries is concentrated in consolidated democracies—those that were rated Free from 1985 through 2005, the 20-year period before the 13-year decline. The average freedom score for consolidated democracies has declined every year for the last 11 years.
- **Evolution of the decline:** Globally, scores in the Rule of Law subcategory suffered the most during the past 13 years. However, the scores driving the decline have shifted more recently. In the last six years, Freedom of Expression and Belief, and especially the indicator focused on people’s freedom to express their personal views without surveillance or retribution, suffered the most. In the last three years, Electoral Process declined more than any other subcategory.

Despite a continued downward trajectory overall, there were several more countries with net improvements in 2018 than in 2017, and a somewhat smaller number with net declines. This does not mean the threat to democracy is coming to an end. Hostile forces around the world continue to challenge the institutions meant to protect political rights and civil liberties, and the damage accrued over the past 13 years will not soon be undone.

freedom status improved between 1988 and 2005 have maintained their new status to date. That major democracies are now flagging in their efforts, or even working in the opposite direction, is cause for real alarm. The truth is that democracy needs defending, and as traditional champions like the United States stumble, core democratic norms meant to ensure peace, prosperity, and freedom for all people are under serious threat around the world.

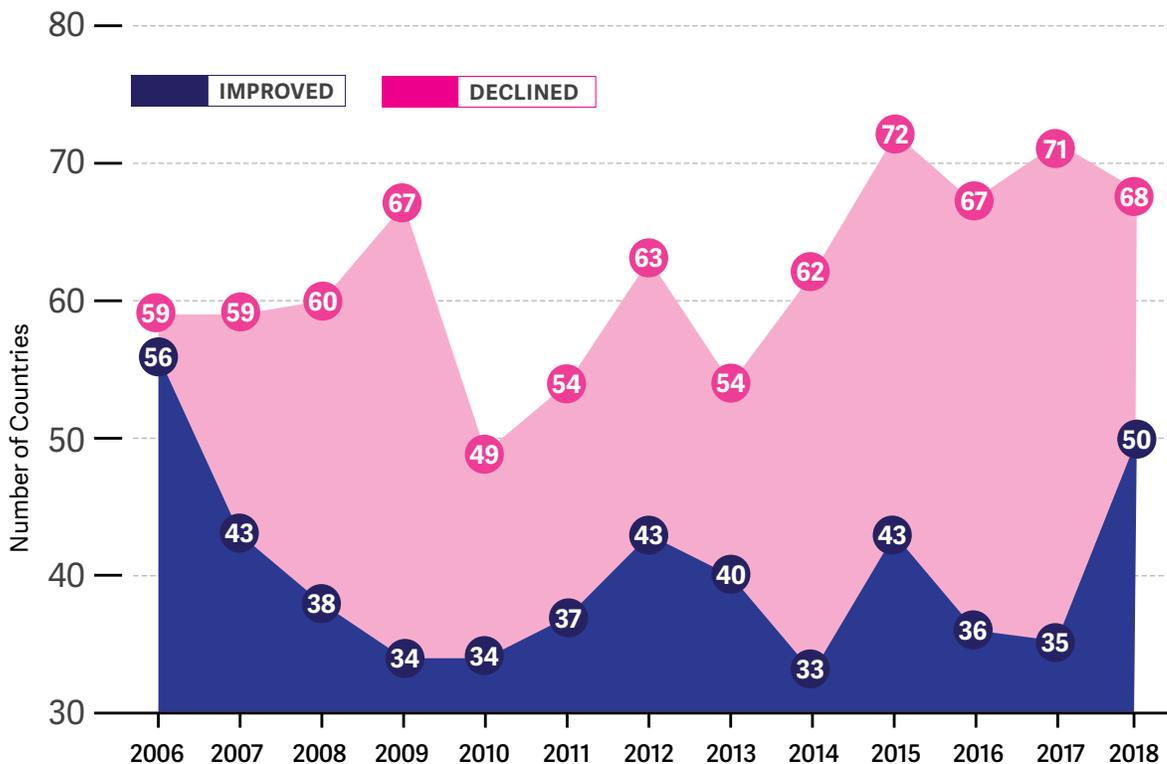
For example, **elections** are being hollowed out as autocracies find ways to control their results while

sustaining a veneer of competitive balloting. Polls in which the outcome is shaped by coercion, fraud, gerrymandering, or other manipulation are increasingly common. Freedom House’s indicators for elections have declined at twice the rate of overall score totals globally during the last three years.

In a related phenomenon, the principle of **term limits for executives**, which have a long provenance in democracies but spread around the world after the end of the Cold War, is weakening. According to Freedom House’s data, leaders in 34 countries have tried to re-

13 YEARS OF DECLINE

Countries with net declines in aggregate score have outnumbered those with gains for the past 13 years.



visa term limits — and have been successful 31 times — since the 13-year global decline began. Attacks on term limits have been especially prominent in Africa, Latin America, and the former Soviet Union.

Freedom of expression has come under sustained attack, through both assaults on the press and encroachments on the speech rights of ordinary citizens. *Freedom in the World* data show freedom of expression declining each year over the past 13 years, with sharper drops since 2012. This year, press freedom scores fell in four out of six regions in the world. Flagrant violations, like the imprisonment of journalists Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo for their investigative reporting in Myanmar, have become more widespread. Even more stark have been the declines in personal expression, as governments have cracked down on critical discussion among citizens, especially online. The explosion of criminal cases for “insulting the president” in Turkey—more than 20,000 investigations and 6,000 prosecutions in 2017 alone—is one of the most glaring examples of this global trend.

The offensive against freedom of expression is being supercharged by **a new and more effective form of**

digital authoritarianism. As documented in Freedom House’s most recent *Freedom on the Net* report, China is now exporting its model of comprehensive internet censorship and surveillance around the world, offering trainings, seminars, and study trips as well as advanced equipment that takes advantage of artificial intelligence and facial recognition technologies. As the internet takes on the role of a virtual public sphere, and as the cost of sophisticated surveillance declines, Beijing’s desire and capacity to spread totalitarian models of digitally enabled social control pose a major risk to democracy worldwide.

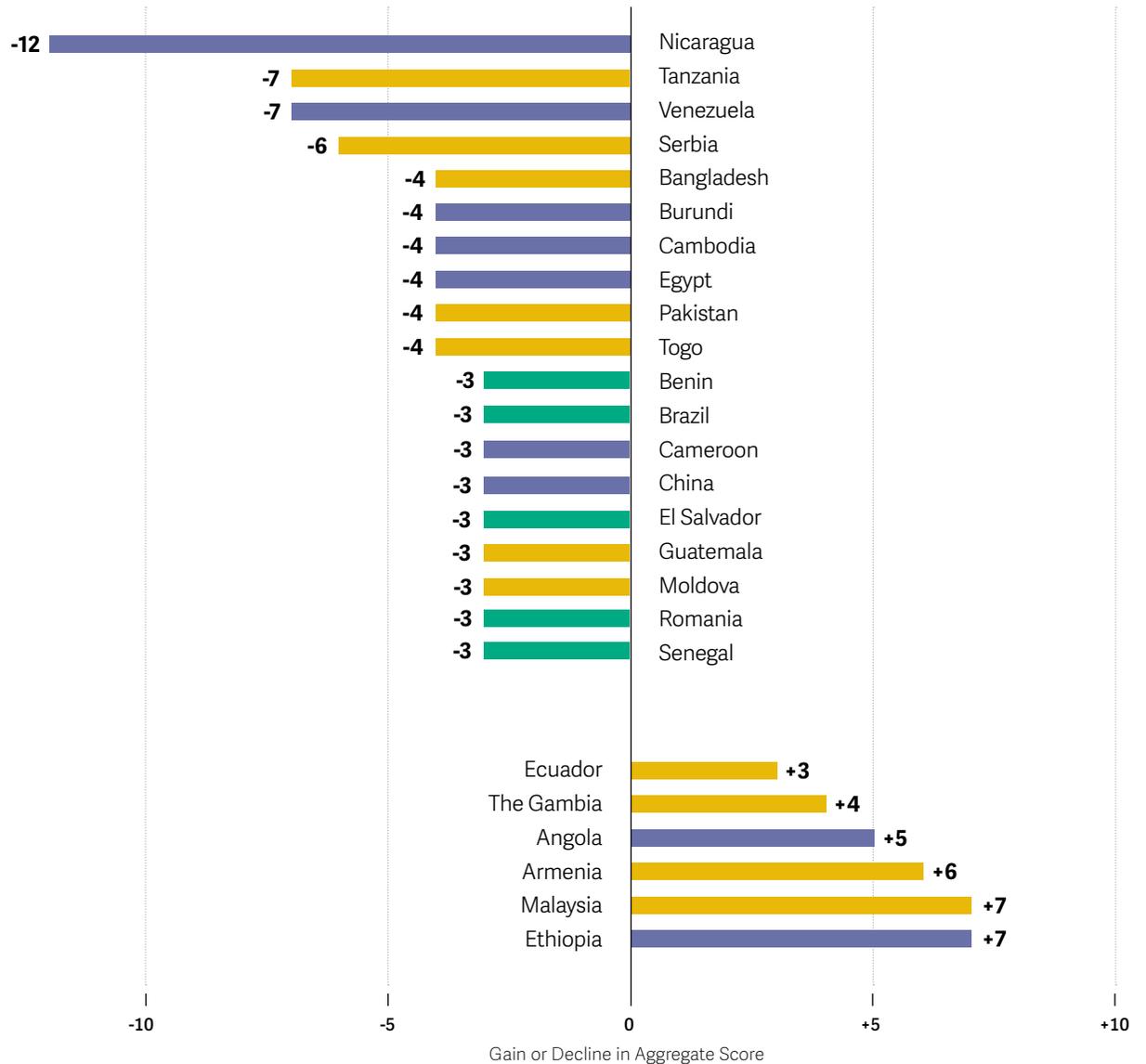
Another norm under siege is protection of **the rights of migrants and refugees**, including the rights to due process, to freedom from discrimination, and to seek asylum. All countries have the legitimate authority to regulate migration, but they must do so in line with international human rights standards and without violating the fundamental principles of justice provided by their own laws and constitutions. Antiliberal populist leaders have increasingly demonized immigrants and asylum seekers and targeted them for discriminatory treatment, often using them as scapegoats to marginalize any political opponents who come to their defense.

LARGEST ONE-YEAR GAINS AND DECLINES IN 2018

Gains in aggregate score reflect improvements in conditions for political rights and civil liberties.



Note: This chart shows aggregate score changes of 3 or more points in countries with a population of 1 million or more.



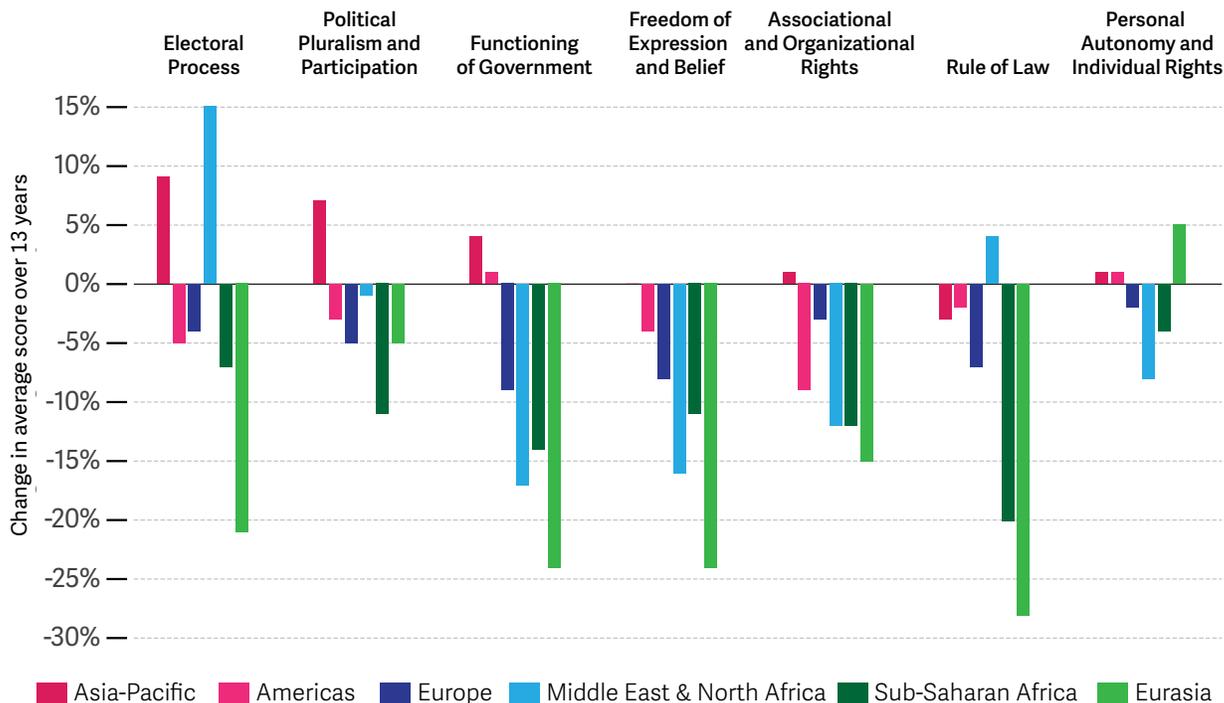
In *Freedom in the World*, eight democracies have suffered score declines in the past three years alone due to their treatment of migrants. With some 257 million people estimated to be in migration around the world, the persistent assault on the rights of migrants is a significant threat to human rights and a potential catalyst for other attacks on democratic safeguards.

In addition to mistreating those who arrive in their territory in search of work or protection, a growing number of governments are reaching beyond their borders to target **expatriates, exiles, and diasporas**. Freedom House found 24 countries around the

world—including heavyweights like Russia, China, Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia—that have recently targeted political dissidents abroad with practices such as harassment, extradition requests, kidnapping, and even assassination. Saudi Arabia’s murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Turkey put a spotlight on authoritarian regimes’ aggressive pursuit of prominent critics. Turkey itself, which has sought to keep Khashoggi’s murder on the front pages, has by its own account captured 104 of its citizens from 21 countries over the last two years in a global crackdown on perceived enemies of the state. Beijing’s growing apparatus for policing opinions and enforcing its views among

DECLINES ACROSS THE BOARD

The 13 years of decline have affected all regions and *Freedom in the World* subcategories.



Chinese citizens and communities overseas has led to outcomes including the forced repatriation of Uighurs from countries where they sought safety and the surveillance of Chinese students at foreign universities. Interpol's notification system has become a tool for authoritarian governments to detain and harass citizens in exile. The normalization of such transnational violence and harassment would not just shut down the last refuges for organized opposition to many repressive regimes. It would also contribute to a broader breakdown in international law and order, a world of borderless persecution in which any country could be a hunting ground for spies and assassins dispatched by tyrants looking to crush dissent.

Most disturbingly, Freedom House's global survey shows that **ethnic cleansing** is a growing trend. In 2005, *Freedom in the World* reduced the scores of just three countries for ethnic cleansing or other egregious efforts to alter the ethnic composition of their territory; this number has since grown to 11, and in some cases the scale or intensity of such activities has increased over time as well. In Syria and Myanmar, hundreds of thousands of civilians from certain ethnic and religious groups have been killed or displaced as world powers either fail to respond adequately or facilitate the violence. Russia's occupation of Crimea

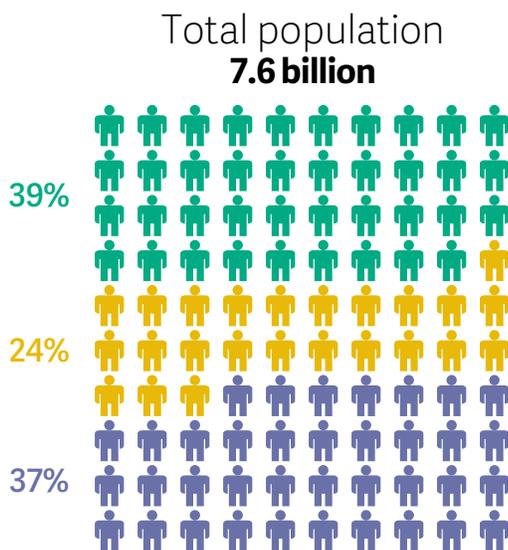
has included targeted repression of Crimean Tatars and those who insist on maintaining their Ukrainian identity. China's mass internment of Uighurs and other Muslims—with some 800,000 to 2 million people held arbitrarily in "reeducation" camps—can only be interpreted as a superpower's attempt to annihilate the distinct identities of minority groups.

Breakthroughs and movements for justice

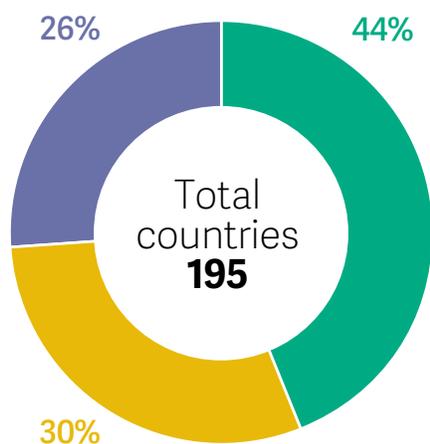
Despite this grim global environment, positive breakthroughs in countries scattered all over the world during 2018 showed that the universal promise of democracy still holds power.

- In **Angola**, new president João Lourenço took notable actions against corruption and impunity, reducing the outsized influence of his long-ruling predecessor's family and granting the courts greater independence.
- In **Armenia**, massive nonviolent demonstrations forced the resignation of Serzh Sargsyan, the country's leader since 2008, who had tried to evade term limits by moving from the presidency to the prime minister's office. After snap elections in December, a new reformist majority in the parliament has pledged to promote transparency and accountability for corruption and abuse of office.

GLOBAL: STATUS BY POPULATION



GLOBAL: STATUS BY COUNTRY



- In **Ecuador**, President Lenín Moreno has defied expectations by breaking with the antidemocratic practices of former president Rafael Correa, including by adopting a more relaxed stance toward media criticism, barring those convicted of corruption from holding office, and passing a constitutional referendum that restored presidential term limits.
- In **Ethiopia**, the monopolistic ruling party began to loosen its grip in response to three years of protests, installing a reform-minded prime minister who oversaw the lifting of a state of emergency, the release of political prisoners, and the creation of space for more public discussion of political issues.
- In **Malaysia**, voters threw out disgraced prime minister Najib Razak and a political coalition that had governed since independence, clearing the way

for a new government that quickly took steps to hold Najib and his family to account for a massive corruption scandal.

In all of these cases, politicians responded or were forced to respond to public demands for democratic change, unexpectedly disrupting long patterns of repression. Such openings serve as a reminder that people continue to strive for freedom, accountability, and dignity, including in countries where the odds seem insurmountable.

While some progress has come in the form of sudden breakthroughs at the leadership level, more incremental societal change offers another reason for hope.

Even in a time of new threats to democracy, social movements around the world are expanding the scope of democratic inclusion. They are part of a multigenerational transformation in how the rights of women, of ethnic, sexual, and religious minorities, of migrants, and of people with disabilities are recognized and upheld in practice—not least in places where they were already constitutionally enshrined. Authoritarian and antiliberal actors fear these movements for justice and participation because they challenge unfair concentrations of status and power. The transformation may still be fragile and incomplete, but its underlying drive—to make good on the 20th century’s promise of universal human rights and democratic institutions—is profound.

In this sense, the current moment contains not only danger, but also opportunity for democracy. Those committed to human rights and democratic governance should not limit themselves to a wary defense of the status quo. Instead we should throw ourselves into projects intended to renew national and international orders, to make protections for human dignity even more just and more comprehensive, including for workers whose lives are disrupted by technological and economic change. Democracy requires continuous effort to thrive, and a constant willingness to broaden and deepen the application of its principles. The future of democracy depends on our ability to show that it is more than a set of bare-minimum defenses against the worst abuses of tyrants—it is a guarantee of the freedom to choose and live out one’s own destiny. We must demonstrate that the full promise of democracy can be realized, and recognize that no one else will do it for us.

Regional Trends

Asia-Pacific

Military influence and persecution of minorities

The military and other security forces played an influential role in key Asian elections and perpetrated gross rights abuses against minorities during 2018. However, a dramatic political shift in Malaysia raised hopes for democratic reform.

Cambodian prime minister Hun Sen cemented his grip on power with lopsided general elections that came after authorities dissolved the main opposition party and shuttered independent media outlets. The military and police openly campaigned for the ruling party, which won all the seats in the legislature. While Pakistan’s elections were more competitive, the military’s influence over the courts and the media was widely thought to have tilted the contest in favor of Imran Khan, who took office as prime minister.

Myanmar’s military was accused by UN investigators of committing genocide against the Rohingya people, over 700,000 of whom have fled to Bangladesh since the start of a violent crackdown in 2017. In China, it is estimated that over a million ethnic Uighurs, Kazakhs, and Hui have been forced into “reeducation” centers, from which grisly reports of torture and custodial deaths are emerging. Meanwhile, Communist Party leader Xi Jinping secured a potential life tenure in March, when the National People’s Congress rubber-stamped a decision to remove the constitution’s two-term limit on the presidency.

In a positive development, outrage over a massive corruption scandal helped an opposition alliance defeat incumbent prime minister Najib Razak’s Barisan Nasional coalition, which had ruled Malaysia for decades; Najib was arrested and charged soon after. The new government pledged to roll back restrictive laws.

In Bangladesh, security forces cracked down on the opposition ahead of parliamentary elections, intimidating and arresting prominent figures. The polls themselves were marked by widespread irregularities and interparty violence that resulted in more than a dozen deaths.

In Sri Lanka, President Maithripala Sirisena’s unilateral dismissal of the prime minister threatened recent democratic gains. Sirisena attempted to disband the parliament when legislators rejected the move, but in a decision reflecting the judiciary’s independence, the Supreme Court declared the dissolution unconstitutional, and the prime minister was restored to office.

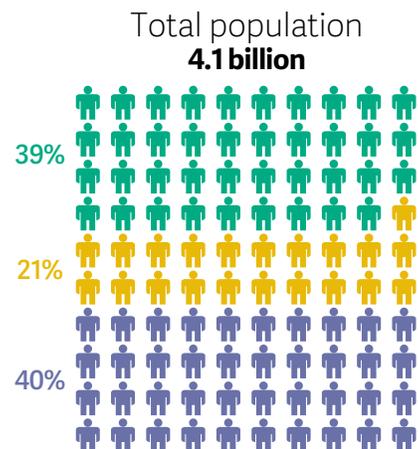
Americas

Crises spur migration, populist leaders win key elections

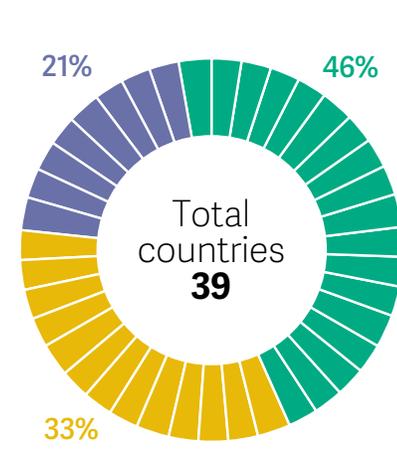
Latin America in 2018 was embroiled in a migration crisis driven in part by government repression in Venezuela and Nicaragua. Elections brought new populist leaders to power in Mexico and in Brazil, where the tense campaign period was marred by political violence.

In Venezuela, President Nicolás Maduro extended his authoritarian rule with a profoundly flawed presidential election characterized by bans on prominent opposition candidates and voter intimidation. Maduro has presided over an economic collapse and accompanying humanitarian crisis that has left millions struggling to meet their basic needs. In Nicaragua,

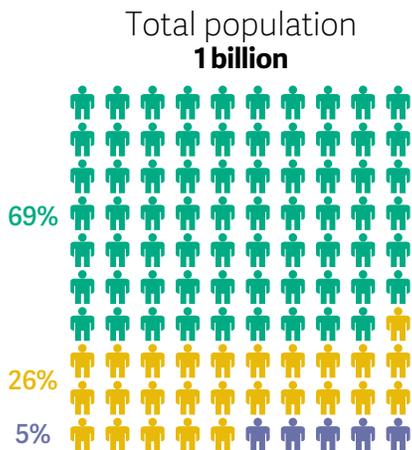
ASIA-PACIFIC: STATUS BY POPULATION



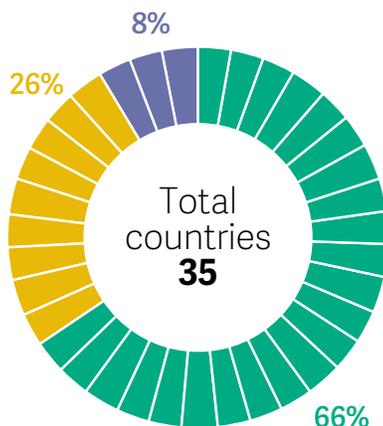
ASIA-PACIFIC: STATUS BY COUNTRY



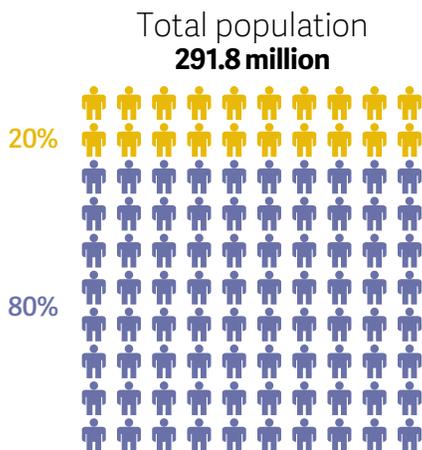
AMERICAS: STATUS BY POPULATION



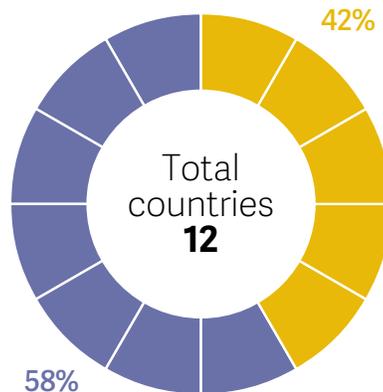
AMERICAS: STATUS BY COUNTRY



EURASIA: STATUS BY POPULATION



EURASIA: STATUS BY COUNTRY



President Daniel Ortega pursued a ferocious crackdown on a nationwide antigovernment protest movement, with violence by state forces and allied armed groups resulting in hundreds of deaths. The harsh conditions in Nicaragua and Venezuela have added to the region's already substantial migration crisis.

Right-wing populist candidate Jair Bolsonaro captured Brazil's presidency after a contentious preelection period that featured disinformation campaigns and political violence. Bolsonaro's rhetoric was steeped in disdain for democratic principles and aggressive pledges to wipe out corruption and violent crime, which resonated with a deeply frustrated electorate. In Mexico, promises to end corruption and confront violent drug gangs also propelled left-wing populist Andrés Manuel López Obrador to the presidency, though he has yet to explain how he will accomplish his goals.

Democratic gains continued in Ecuador, where space for civil society and the media has opened. Yet it too grapples with serious challenges. An Ecuadoran journalist and two of his colleagues were killed along the Colombian border by leftist guerrillas, and anti-immigrant sentiment is on the rise.

Eurasia

A breakthrough in Armenia as other regimes harden authoritarian rule

Entrenched elites in many Eurasian countries continued exploiting the advantages of incumbency to maintain their grip on power. However, Armenia broke that pattern with the ouster of an unpopular leader and the election of a new, reform-minded government.

In the spring of 2018, Armenians took to the streets in protest of an attempt by Serzh Sargsyan to extend his rule by shifting from the presidency to the prime minister's office. To widespread surprise, the protests culminated in Sargsyan's resignation and the rise of opposition leader Nikol Pashinyan to the premiership. Pashinyan's My Step alliance decisively won snap parliamentary elections in December, clearing the way for systemic reforms.

Uzbekistan experienced another year of incremental improvement, as the government continued to release political prisoners and ease restrictions on NGOs. However, reports of torture persisted, as did the long-standing practice of forced labor in the cotton fields.

Russia's Vladimir Putin and Azerbaijan's Ilham Aliyev each secured new presidential terms, benefiting from strong-arm tactics including the repression of independent media and civil society, the abuse of state resources, and the persecution of genuine political opponents—as well as outright fraud.

Journalists and activists in Russia and other countries continued to operate under perilous conditions, risking arrest, violence, and even death for their independent reporting in 2018. Several Russian journalists died under suspicious circumstances, while in Ukraine, reporters endured harassment and assaults. In Kazakhstan and Belarus, strict new media laws further limited journalists who were already operating under severe constraints.

Some governments stepped up internet censorship in order to stamp out dissent. In Kyrgyzstan, the government used laws against extremism to block websites, video-sharing platforms, and even the music-streaming service SoundCloud, while Tajikistan blocked independent media websites and social networks.

Europe

Antidemocratic leaders undermine critical institutions

Antidemocratic leaders in Central Europe and the Balkans—including some who have brazenly consolidated power beyond constitutional limits—continued undermining institutions that protect freedoms of expression and association and the rule of law.

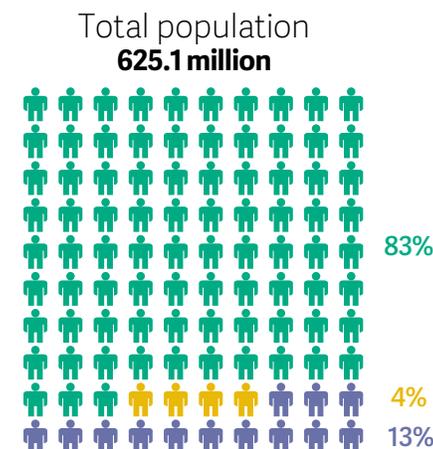
In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has presided over one of the most dramatic declines ever charted by Freedom House within the European Union. Having worked methodically to deny critical voices a platform in the media or civil society, Orbán and his right-wing nationalist Fidesz party easily defended their parliamentary supermajority in 2018 elections. Soon after, the government forced the closure of Central European University, evicting its vibrant academic community. However, the year ended with vigorous dissent from thousands of protesters who took to the streets to denounce Orbán's abuses.

In Poland, the conservative Law and Justice party led by Jarosław Kaczyński—who plays a dominant political role despite holding no formal executive position—laid waste to the country's legal framework in its drive to assert political control over the entire judiciary. The year included attempts to force the retirement of Supreme Court judges and gain partisan influence over the selection of election commission members.

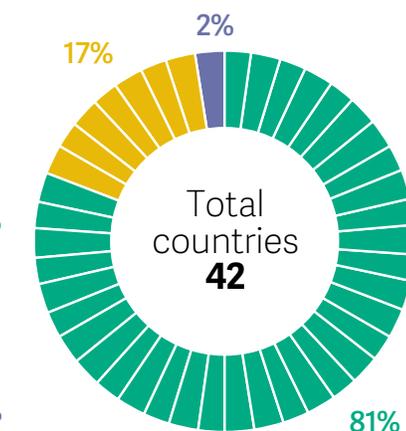
Meanwhile, attacks on media independence spread to other European democracies. Austria's new right-wing government put pressure on the public broadcaster, while Czech prime minister Andrej Babiš drew on closely allied media outlets to combat unflattering scandals. In Slovakia, investigative reporter Ján Kuciak was shot to death in his home after uncovering corrupt links between government officials and organized crime.

In the Balkans, President Aleksandar Vučić of Serbia and President Milo Đukanović of Montenegro continued to consolidate state power around themselves

EUROPE: STATUS BY POPULATION



EUROPE: STATUS BY COUNTRY



and their cliques, subverting basic standards of good governance and exceeding their assigned constitutional roles.

In Turkey, simultaneous parliamentary and presidential elections took place in June despite a two-year state of emergency that included the imprisonment of the leaders of a key opposition party and extreme curbs on freedoms of association, assembly, and expression. Although the state of emergency was lifted following the election, the authorities continued to engage in purges of state institutions and arrests of journalists, civil society members, and academics.

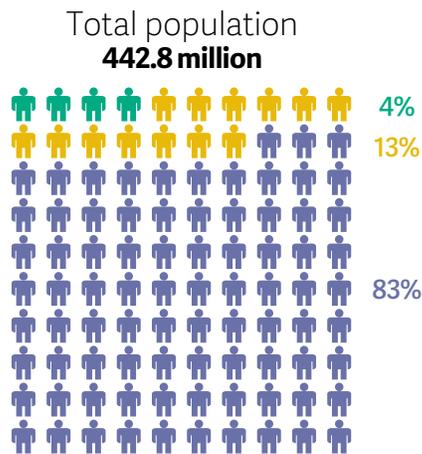
Middle East and North Africa

Repression grows as democracies stumble

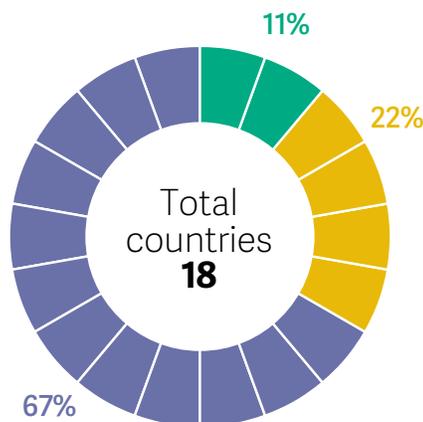
Authoritarian states across the Middle East and North Africa continued to suppress dissent during 2018, and even the few democracies in the region suffered from self-inflicted wounds. However, elections held in Iraq and Lebanon could stabilize those countries and open the way for modest progress.

Political repression worsened in Egypt, where President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi was reelected with 97 percent of the vote after security forces arbitrarily detained potential challengers. In Saudi Arabia, after the government drew praise for easing its draconian ban on women driving, authorities arrested high-profile women's rights activists and clamped down on even mild forms of dissent. Evidence also mounted that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman had per-

MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA:
STATUS BY POPULATION



MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA:
STATUS BY COUNTRY



sonally ordered the assassination of self-exiled critic and *Washington Post* columnist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul, dashing any remaining hopes that the young prince might emerge as a reformer.

The consolidation of democracy in Tunisia continued to sputter, as freedoms of assembly and association were imperiled by legislative changes and the leadership's failure to set up a Constitutional Court undermined judicial independence and the rule of law.

Nationalism escalated in Israel—the only other country in the region designated as Free—placing strain on its democracy. A new law allowed the interior minister to revoke the residency of Jerusalem-based Palestinians for, among other things, a “breach of loyalty” to Israel. Moreover, an addition to the country’s Basic Law downgraded the status of the Arabic language and introduced the principle that only the Jewish people have the right to exercise self-determination in the country.

National elections in Iraq and Lebanon held some promise of further gains. Despite allegations of fraud and a controversial recount, Iraqis witnessed a peaceful transfer of power following competitive parliamentary polls. However, antigovernment protests in the southern city of Basra at year’s end were met with a disproportionately violent response by security forces. In Lebanon, parliamentary elections took place for the first time since 2009, restoring a degree of legitimacy to the government after repeated postponements of the balloting.

Sub-Saharan Africa

Historic openings offset by creeping restrictions elsewhere

The year brought notable democratic progress in a number of pivotal African countries and increasing threats to freedom in others.

Angola and Ethiopia—both historically closed countries ruled by autocratic leaders—experienced dramatic openings in 2018. While their new leaders, President João Lourenço and Prime Minister Ahmed Abiy, respectively, each emerged from the countries’ dominant political cliques, both have expressed a commitment to important reforms. If the new administrations are able to dismantle the repressive legal and political frameworks they inherited, they may serve as important models for their neighbors and significantly improve the democratic trajectory of the continent as a whole.

The Gambia made rapid democratic gains for a second year, following the dramatic exit of strongman Yahya Jammeh in early 2017. The political opening under President Adama Barrow was reinforced by 2018 legislative elections, in which seven parties and several independent candidates won seats.

Yet many countries in the region still struggled to deliver basic freedoms and protect human rights. Zimbabwe’s political system returned in some ways to its precoup status quo, as the ruling ZANU-PF party won deeply flawed general elections following the military’s ouster of longtime president Robert Mugabe in 2017. Despite President Emmerson Mnangagwa’s pledges to respect political institutions and govern in the interest of all Zimbabweans, his new administration has shown few signs that it is committed to fostering genuine political competition, and it has continued to enforce laws that limit expression.

Space for political activity continued to close in several countries, notably Tanzania, where the government arrested prominent opposition leaders, stifled antigovernment protests, and pushed for legislation that further strengthens the ruling party’s stranglehold on domestic politics. In Uganda, long-ruling president Yoweri Museveni’s administration sought to constrain dissent by implementing new surveillance systems and instituting a regressive tax on social media use. Senegal’s reputation as one of the most stable democracies in West Africa was threatened by new regula-

Freedom in the World 2019 Status Changes

Hungary

 Hungary's status declined from Free to Partly Free due to sustained attacks on the country's democratic institutions by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party, which has used its parliamentary supermajority to impose restrictions on or assert control over the opposition, the media, religious groups, academia, NGOs, the courts, asylum seekers, and the private sector since 2010.

Nicaragua

 Nicaragua's status declined from Partly Free to Not Free due to authorities' brutal repression of an antigovernment protest movement, which has included the arrest and imprisonment of opposition figures, intimidation and attacks against religious leaders, and violence by state forces and allied armed groups that resulted in hundreds of deaths.

Serbia

 Serbia's status declined from Free to Partly Free due to deterioration in the conduct of elections, continued attempts by the government and allied media outlets to undermine independent journalists through legal harassment and smear campaigns, and President Aleksandar Vučić's de facto accumulation of executive powers that conflict with his constitutional role.

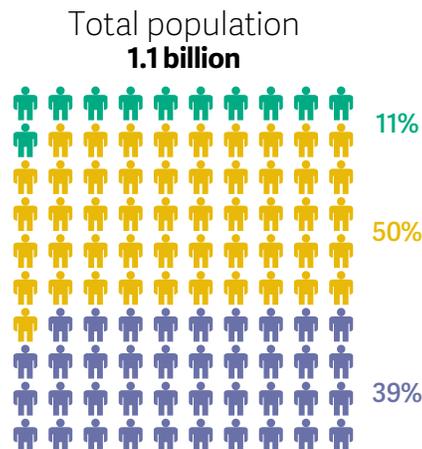
Uganda

 Uganda's status declined from Partly Free to Not Free due to attempts by long-ruling president Yoweri Museveni's government to restrict free expression, including through surveillance of electronic communications and a regressive tax on social media use.

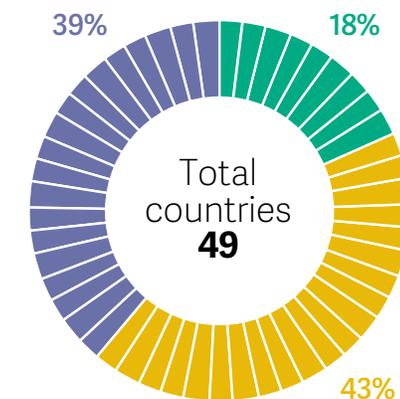
Zimbabwe

 Zimbabwe's status improved from Not Free to Partly Free because the 2018 presidential election, though deeply flawed, granted a degree of legitimacy to the rule of President Emmerson Mnangagwa, who had taken power after the military forced his predecessor's resignation in 2017.

SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: STATUS BY POPULATION



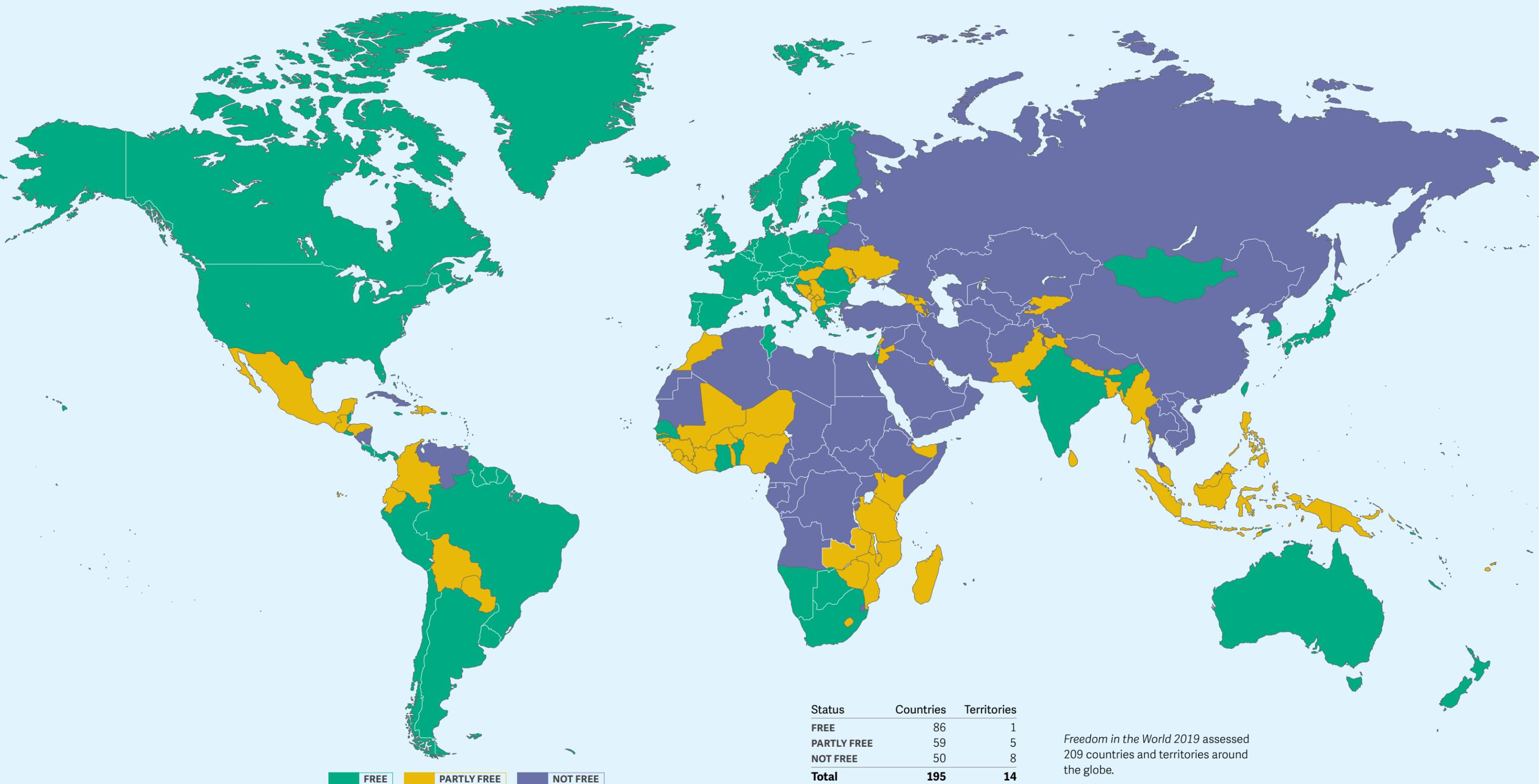
SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: STATUS BY COUNTRY



tory barriers that could limit the opposition's participation in upcoming elections. The arbitrary detention and prosecution of a potential opposition presidential candidate cast doubt on the independence of the judiciary and the government's commitment to the rule of law.

Several of the continent's aging authoritarian leaders continued to cling to power. In Cameroon, President Paul Biya, now in office for 36 years, presided over deeply flawed elections in which he secured a seventh term, while in Uganda, Museveni—in office for 32 years—oversaw the removal of a presidential age cap from the constitution, allowing him to run for a sixth term in 2021. In Togo, one of only two countries in West Africa without term limits, President Faure Gnassingbé (whose family has been in power since 1967) resisted popular efforts to impose such a barrier.

FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2019



FREE
PARTLY FREE
NOT FREE

Status	Countries	Territories
FREE	86	1
PARTLY FREE	59	5
NOT FREE	50	8
Total	195	14

Freedom in the World 2019 assessed 209 countries and territories around the globe.

Countries in the Spotlight

The following countries saw important developments during the survey period that affected their democratic trajectory, and deserve special scrutiny in 2019.

- In a region dominated by entrenched elites, **Armenia** made a breakthrough with the victory of reform-minded leader Nikol Pashinyan in snap elections that were called after unpopular incumbent Serzh Sargsyan attempted to evade term limits and extend his rule.
- Right-wing candidate Jair Bolsonaro captured **Brazil's** presidency after expressing disdain for democratic principles and promising extreme measures to wipe out corruption and violent crime.
- **Cambodia's** prime minister, Hun Sen, fortified his near-total grip on power in lopsided general elections that came after authorities dissolved the main opposition party and shuttered independent media outlets.
- President Paul Biya of **Cameroon**—who has been in office for over three decades—extended his rule through deeply flawed elections, while violence accompanying an ongoing crisis in the Anglo-phone region threatened to erupt into civil war.
- In **China**, over a million ethnic Uighurs, Kazakhs, and Hui were forced into brutal “reeducation” centers, and a rubber-stamp decision by the National People’s Congress cleared the way for President Xi Jinping to remain in office indefinitely.
- Following sustained protests in **Ethiopia**, the ruling party installed a reformist prime minister who lifted a state of emergency, released political prisoners, and permitted more open political debate.
- Despite allegations of fraud and a controversial recount, **Iraq** underwent a peaceful transfer of power following competitive parliamentary elections.
- In **Poland**, the conservative Law and Justice party

Worst of the Worst

Of the 50 countries designated as Not Free, the following 13 have the worst aggregate scores for political rights and civil liberties.

Country	Aggregate score
Syria	0
South Sudan	2
Eritrea	2
Turkmenistan	2
North Korea	3
Equatorial Guinea	6
Saudi Arabia	7
Somalia	7
Sudan	7
Tajikistan	9
Uzbekistan	9
Central African Republic	9
Libya	9

has laid waste to the country’s legal framework—and the underpinnings of its democracy—in its drive to assert control over the judiciary.

- In **Sri Lanka**, President Maithripala Sirisena’s attempt to unilaterally dismiss the prime minister threatened recent democratic gains, though the Supreme Court exhibited its independence by declaring the move unconstitutional.
- In **Tanzania**, the government arrested prominent opposition leaders, stifled antigovernment protests, and pushed for legislation that further strengthens the ruling party’s stranglehold on politics.

The Struggle Comes Home: Attacks on Democracy in the United States

By Mike Abramowitz
President, Freedom House

Freedom House has advocated for democracy around the world since its founding in 1941, and since the early 1970s it has monitored the global status of political rights and civil liberties in the annual *Freedom in the World* report. During the report's first three decades, as the Cold War gave way to a general advance of liberal democratic values, we urged on reformist movements and denounced the remaining dictators for foot-dragging and active resistance. We raised the alarm when progress stagnated in the 2000s, and called on major democracies to maintain their support for free institutions.

Today, after 13 consecutive years of decline in global freedom, backsliding among new democracies has been compounded by the erosion of political rights and civil liberties among the established democracies we have traditionally looked to for leadership and support. Indeed, the pillars of freedom have come under attack here in the United States. And just as we have called out foreign leaders for undermining democratic norms in their countries, we must draw attention to the same sorts of warning signs in our own country. It is in keeping with our mission, and given the irreplaceable role of the United States as a champion of global freedom, it is a priority we cannot afford to ignore.

US freedom in decline

The great challenges facing US democracy did not commence with the inauguration of President Donald Trump. Intensifying political polarization, declining economic mobility, the outsized influence of special interests, and the diminished influence of fact-based reporting in favor of bellicose partisan media were all

problems afflicting the health of American democracy well before 2017. Previous presidents have contributed to the pressure on our system by infringing on the rights of American citizens. Surveillance programs such as the bulk collection of communications metadata, initially undertaken by the George W. Bush administration, and the Obama administration's overzealous crackdown on press leaks are two cases in point.

At the midpoint of his term, however, there remains little question that President Trump exerts an influence on American politics that is straining our core values and testing the stability of our constitutional system. No president in living memory has shown less respect for its tenets, norms, and principles. Trump has assailed essential institutions and traditions including the separation of powers, a free press, an independent judiciary, the impartial delivery of justice, safeguards against corruption, and most disturbingly, the legitimacy of elections. Congress, a coequal branch of government, has too frequently failed to push back



US president Donald Trump waves as he boards Air Force One.

Kevin Dietsch-Pool/
Getty Images

against these attacks with meaningful oversight and other defenses.

We recognize the right of freely elected presidents and lawmakers to set immigration policy, adopt different levels of regulation and taxation, and pursue other legitimate aims related to national security. But they must do so according to rules designed to protect individual rights and ensure the long-term survival of the democratic system. There are no ends that justify nondemocratic means.

Freedom House is not alone in its concern for US democracy. Republicans, Democrats, and independents expressed deep reservations about its performance in a national poll conducted last year by Freedom House, the George W. Bush Institute, and the Penn Biden Center. A substantial majority of respondents said it is “absolutely important” to live in a democracy, but 55 percent agreed that American democracy is weak, and 68 percent said it is getting weaker. Big money in politics, racism and discrimination, and the inability of government to get things done—all long-standing problems—were the top concerns of those surveyed.

And yet Republicans and Democrats alike expressed strong attachments to individual liberty. A solid ma-

ajority, 54 percent, believes it is more important for the rights of the minority to be protected than for the will of the majority to prevail.

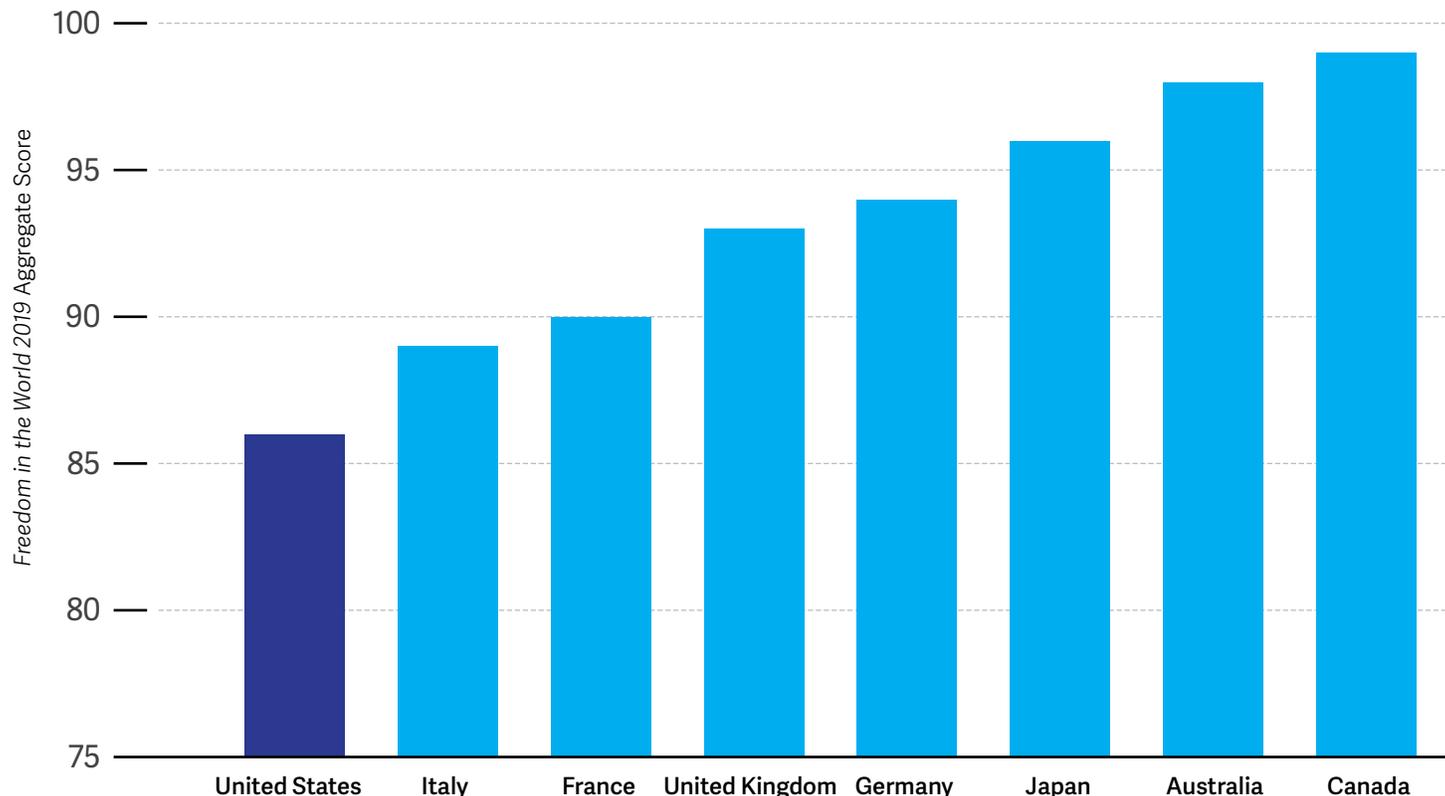
So far, America’s institutions have largely honored this deeply democratic sentiment. The resilience of the judiciary, the press corps, an energetic civil society, the political opposition, and other guardrails of the constitutional system—as well as some conscientious lawmakers and officeholders from the president’s own party—have checked the chief executive’s worst impulses and mitigated the effects of his administration’s approach. While the United States suffered an unusual three-point drop on *Freedom in the World’s* 100-point scale for 2017, there was no additional net decline for 2018, and the total score of 86 still places the country firmly in the report’s Free category.

But the fact that the system has proven durable so far is no guarantee that it will continue to do so. Elsewhere in the world, in places like Hungary, Venezuela, or Turkey, Freedom House has watched as democratic institutions gradually succumbed to sustained pressure from an antidemocratic leadership, often after a halting start. Irresponsible rhetoric can be a first step toward real restrictions on freedom. The United States has already been weakened by declines in the rule of

Attacks on Democracy in the United States

HOW DOES THE UNITED STATES STACK UP AGAINST ITS PEERS?

Although the country remains firmly in the Free category, it ranks lower than its peers.



Note: This chart shows all countries that have been categorized as Free in every *Freedom in the World* edition and have a population of 20 million or more.

law, the conduct of elections, and safeguards against corruption, among other important indicators measured by *Freedom in the World*. The current overall US score puts American democracy closer to struggling counterparts like Croatia than to traditional peers such as Germany or the United Kingdom.

The stakes in this struggle are high. For all the claims that the United States has lost global influence over the past decade, the reality is that other countries pay close attention to the conduct of the world's oldest functioning democracy. The continuing deterioration of US democracy will hasten the ongoing decline in global democracy. Indeed, it has already done so.

Ronald Reagan declared in his first inaugural address, "As we renew ourselves here in our own land, we will be seen as having greater strength throughout the world. We will again be the exemplar of freedom and a beacon of hope for those who do not now have

freedom." Nearly four decades later, the idea that the United States is such an exemplar is being steadily discredited.

Assailing the rule of law

In any democracy, it is the role of independent judges and prosecutors to defend the supremacy and continuity of constitutional law against excesses by elected officials, to ensure that individual rights are not abused by hostile majorities or other powerful interests, and to prevent the politicization of justice so that competing parties can alternate in office without fear of unfair retribution. While not without problems, the United States has enjoyed a strong tradition of respect for the rule of law.

President Trump has repeatedly shown disdain for this tradition. Late in 2018, after a federal judge blocked the administration's plan to consider asylum claims only from those who cross the border at official ports of entry, the president said, "This was an Obama judge.

And I'll tell you what, it's not going to happen like this anymore."

The remark drew a rare rebuke from Chief Justice John Roberts, who declared "we don't have Obama judges or Trump judges, Bush judges or Clinton judges," and defended an independent judiciary as "something we should all be thankful for." But Trump shrugged off Roberts's intervention of behalf of the judicial branch, insisting that the US Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit was "a complete and total disaster" and that if his asylum policy was obstructed, "there will be only bedlam, chaos, injury and death."

Nor was this the first sign of hostility to the rule of law from the president. As a candidate in 2016, he questioned the impartiality of an American-born judge with a Hispanic surname who presided over a fraud suit filed against "Trump University." Soon after taking office, he disparaged a federal judge who ruled against his travel ban on several Muslim-majority countries as "this so-called judge."

The president has since urged the Department of Justice to prosecute his political opponents and critics. He has used his pardon power to reward political and ideological allies and encourage targets of criminal investigations to refuse cooperation with the government. He has expressed contempt for witnesses who are cooperating with law enforcement in cases that could harm his interests and praised those who remain silent. His administration's harsh policies on immigrants and asylum seekers have restricted their rights, belittled our nation's core ideals, and seriously compromised equal treatment under the law. In October 2018, the president went so far as to claim that he could unilaterally overturn the constitutional guarantee of birthright citizenship.

The president's attacks on the judiciary and law enforcement, echoed by media allies, are eroding the public's trust in the third branch of government and the rule of law. Without that trust, the outright politicization of justice could well ensue, threatening the very stability of our democracy. Any American is free to contest the wisdom of a judge's ruling, but no one—least of all the president—should challenge the authority of the courts themselves or use threats and incentives to pervert the legal process.

Demonizing the press

Legal protections for reporters are enshrined in America's founding documents, and press freedom remains strong in practice. An array of independent media organizations have continued to produce vigorous coverage of the administration. But the constant vilification of such outlets by President Trump, in an already polarized media environment, is accelerating the breakdown of public confidence in journalism as a legitimate, fact-based check on government power. We have seen in other countries how such practices paved the way to more tangible erosions of press freedom and, in extreme cases, put journalists in physical danger. It would be foolish to assume it could never happen here.

In a tweet posted two days after a mass shooting at a Pittsburgh synagogue last October, and not long after a series of pipe bombs had been sent by a Trump supporter to targets including CNN, the president blamed the media for inciting public rage: "There is great anger in our Country caused in part by inaccurate, and even fraudulent, reporting of the news," Trump wrote. "The Fake News Media, the true Enemy of the People, must stop the open & obvious hostility & report the news accurately & fairly. That will do much to put out the flame ... of Anger and Outrage and we will then be able to bring all sides together in Peace and Harmony. Fake News Must End!"

Previous presidents have criticized the press, sometimes bitterly, but none with such relentless hostility for the institution itself. Trump alone has deployed slurs like "enemy of the people," flirted with the idea that the media are responsible for and perhaps deserving of violence, and defended his own routine falsehoods while accusing journalists of lying with malicious, even treasonous intent.

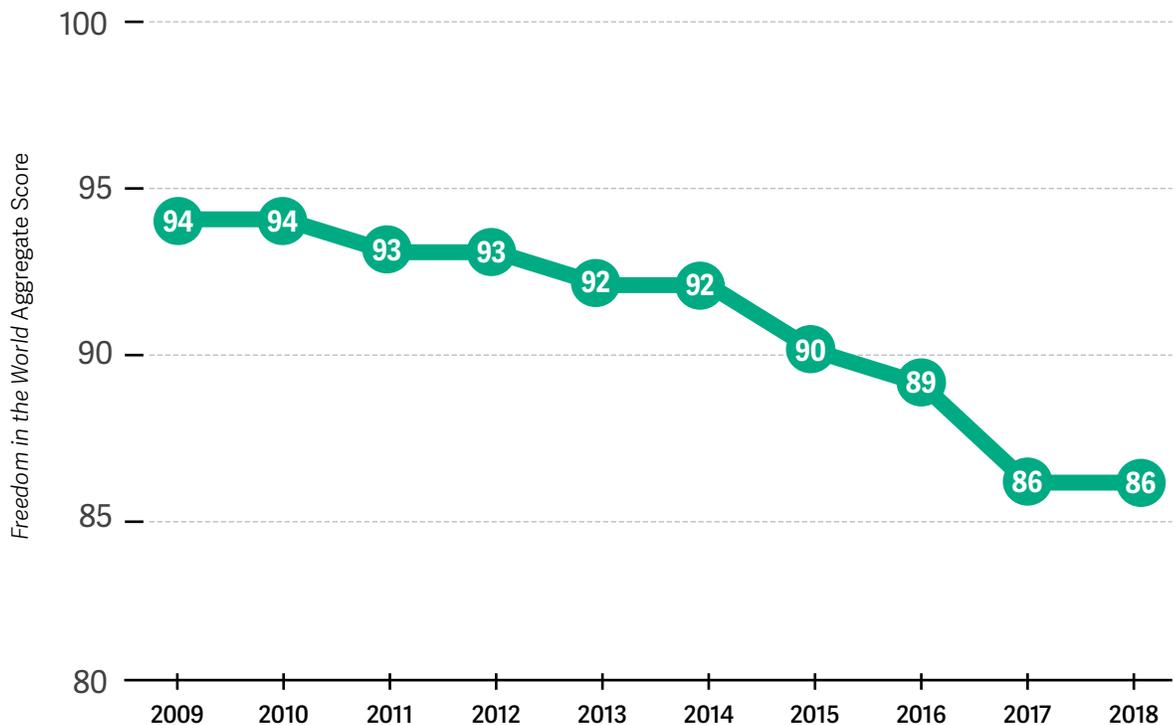
These practices have added to negative trends that were already apparent by 2017, including the emergence of more polarized media outlets on the right and left, the decline of independent reporting at the state and municipal level, the consolidation of ownership in certain sectors, and the rise of social media platforms that reward extreme views and fraudulent content. In this environment, more Americans are likely to seek refuge in media echo chambers, heeding only "reporting" that affirms their opinions rather than obtaining the factual information necessary to self-governance.

Attacks on Democracy in the United States

Note: *Freedom in the World* aggregate scores are on a scale from 0 to 100, where 0 is least free and 100 is most free.

THE EROSION OF US DEMOCRACY

Freedom House has tracked a gradual decline in the total US score over the past eight years.



An independent, pluralistic, and vigilant press corps often antagonizes the subjects it covers. That is an acceptable consequence of the essential service it provides—keeping our democratic system honest, transparent, and accountable to the people. The press exposes private and public-sector corruption, abuses of power, invasions of privacy, and threats to public health and safety. Attempts by our leaders to disrupt this process through smears and intimidation could leave all Americans, the president’s supporters and detractors alike, more vulnerable to exploitation, perfidy, and physical hazard.

Self-dealing and conflicts of interest

Corruption and transparency are crucial factors in Freedom House’s assessments of democracy around the world. When officials use their positions to enrich themselves, or even tolerate conflicts of interest that sow public doubts about their motivations, citizens lose faith in the system and begin to avoid their own responsibilities, including paying taxes, participating in elections, and obeying the law in general. To avoid such decay, it is imperative that government and

citizens alike uphold ethical rules and norms against corruption.

The United States benefits from a number of strong antigraft protections, including independent courts, congressional oversight mechanisms, and active monitoring by the media and civil society. But as on other topics, President Trump has broken with his modern predecessors in flouting the ethical standards of public service.

From the outset of his administration, the president has been willing to ignore obvious conflicts of interest, most prominently with his decision not to divest ownership of his businesses or place them in a blind trust. Instead, he moved them into a revocable trust, managed by his sons, of which he is the sole beneficiary. During his presidency, his businesses have accepted money from foreign lenders, including banks controlled by the Chinese government. Trump has swept aside the norm against nepotism by having his daughter and son-in-law, both seemingly saddled with their own conflicts of interest, serve as

The United States in Decline

Freedom House has tracked a slow overall decline in political rights and civil liberties in the United States for the past eight years, punctuated by an unusual three-point drop for developments in 2017. Prominent concerns have included Russian interference in US elections, domestic attempts to manipulate the electoral system, executive and legislative dysfunction, conflicts of interest and lack of transparency, and pressure on judicial independence and the rule of law.

This year, the United States' total score on the 100-point scale used by *Freedom in the World* remains the same as in the report covering 2017, with two indicators changing in opposite directions:

- The score for freedom of assembly improved, as there was no repetition of the protest-related violence that had led to a lower score for the previous two years. In fact, there was an upsurge of civic action and demonstrations on issues ranging from women's rights and immi-

gration policy to the problem of mass shootings in schools.

- The score for equal treatment before the law declined due to government policies and actions that improperly restricted the legal rights of asylum seekers, signs of discrimination in the acceptance of refugees for resettlement, and excessively harsh or haphazard immigration enforcement policies that resulted in the separation of children from adult family members, among other problematic outcomes.

The United States currently receives a score of 86 out of 100 points. While this places it below other major democracies such as France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, it is still firmly in the Free category. Nevertheless, its decline of eight points in as many years is significant. The United States' closest peers with respect to total *Freedom in the World* scores are Belize, Croatia, Greece, Latvia, and Mongolia.

senior White House advisers. He also rejected the tradition obliging presidents to release their income tax records.

Trump properties have hosted foreign delegations, business dinners, trade association conferences, and Republican Party fund-raising events, complete with Trump-branded wines and other products, likely arranged in the hope of earning the president's gratitude. The *Washington Post* revealed that a month after President Trump's election, lobbyists representing Saudi Arabia booked hundreds of rooms at Trump International Hotel in the capital. Indeed, a number of foreign and domestic interests allegedly sought to influence the new administration by arranging donations to Trump's inauguration festivities, which are now under investigation.

The unusual nature of President Trump's approach to conflicts of interest has been underscored by the emergence of first-of-their-kind lawsuits accusing him of violating the constitution's prohibition on public

officials accepting gifts or "emoluments" from foreign states. The nation's founders understood the corrosive threat of such corruption, and so have most presidents.

Attacking the legitimacy of elections

The importance of credible elections to the health of a democracy should be self-evident. If citizens believe that the polls are rigged, they will neither take part in the exercise nor accept the legitimacy of those elected.

Nevertheless, unsubstantiated accusations of voter fraud have been a staple of the president's assault on political norms. During the 2018 midterm elections, he suggested without evidence that Democrats were stealing a Senate seat in Arizona and committing fraud in Florida's senatorial and gubernatorial balloting. He complained that undocumented asylum seekers were invading the country so they could vote for Democrats. He suggested that Democratic voters were returning to the polls in disguise to vote more than once.

Attacks on Democracy in the United States



Demonstrators take part in a protest against US immigration policies outside the US embassy in Mexico City on June 21, 2018.

*Pedro Pardo/
AFP/Getty Images*

Months before his own election in 2016, candidate Trump began alleging voter fraud and warned that he might not accept the results if he lost. Even after winning, he insisted that millions of fraudulent votes had been cast against him. To substantiate his claims, he created a special commission to investigate the problem. It was quietly disbanded in early 2018 without producing any evidence.

At the same time, the administration has shown little interest in addressing genuine and documented threats to the integrity of US elections, including chronic problems like partisan gerrymandering and the fact that balloting is overseen by partisan officials in the states.

But the most glaring lapse is the president's refusal to clearly acknowledge and comprehensively combat Russian and other foreign attempts to meddle in American elections since 2016. The Homeland Security Department provided some assistance to states in protecting their voting and counting systems from outside meddling in 2018, but recent reports commissioned by the Senate Intelligence Committee indicate that foreign influence operations are ongoing across multiple online platforms, and that such campaigns are likely to expand and multiply in the future.

The threat to American ideals abroad

Our poll found that a strong majority of Americans, 71 percent, believe the US government should actively support democracy and human rights in other countries. But America's commitment to the global

progress of democracy has been seriously compromised by the president's rhetoric and actions. His attacks on the judiciary and the press, his resistance to anticorruption safeguards, and his unfounded claims of voting fraud by the opposition are all familiar tactics to foreign autocrats and populist demagogues who seek to subvert checks on their power.

Such leaders can take heart from Trump's bitter feuding with America's traditional democratic allies and his reluctance to uphold the nation's collective defense treaties, which have helped guarantee international security for decades. As former US defense secretary James Mattis put it in his resignation letter, "While the US remains the indispensable nation in the free world, we cannot protect our interests or serve that role effectively without maintaining strong alliances and showing respect to those allies."

Trump has refused to advocate for America's democratic values, and he seems to encourage the forces that oppose them. His frequent, fulsome praise for some of the world's worst dictators reinforces this perception. Particularly striking was his apparent willingness, at a summit in Helsinki, to accept the word of Vladimir Putin over his own intelligence agencies in assessing Russia's actions in the 2016 elections.

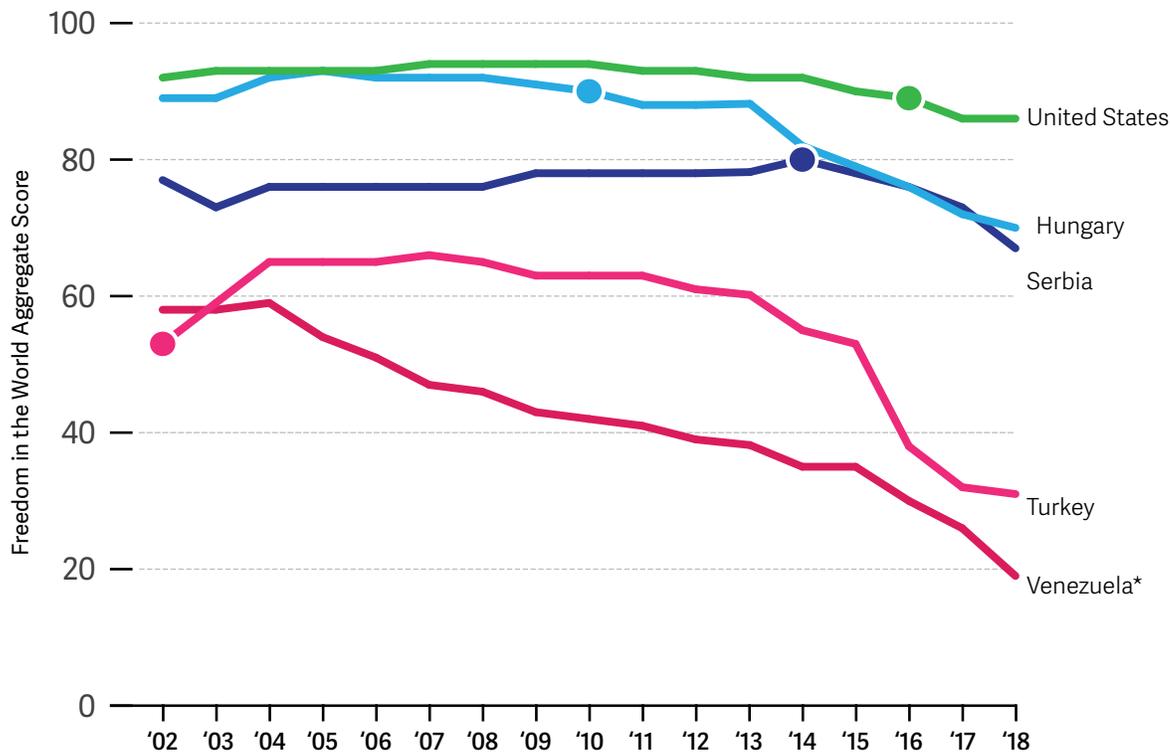
The president's rhetoric is echoed in countries with weaker defenses against attacks on their democratic institutions, where the violation of norms is often followed by systemic changes that intensify repression and entrench authoritarian governance.

For example, Cambodian strongman Hun Sen consolidated one-party rule in sham elections last summer after banning the main opposition party and shutting down independent media. He acknowledged that he and President Trump shared a point of view about journalists, saying, "Donald Trump understands that they are an anarchic group." Poland's president, whose party has sought to annihilate judicial independence and assert control over the press, similarly thanked Trump for fighting "fake news." Saudi Arabia's crown prince almost certainly ordered the assassination of a leading journalistic critic, apparently believing that the action would not rupture relations with the president of the United States. It seems he was correct.

As the United States ceases its global advocacy of

WEARING DOWN DEMOCRACY

The effects of a leader's attacks on democratic institutions, while not always apparent at first, can be devastating over time.



The circles indicate the year when the current ruling party or leader was initially elected.

*The predecessor of the current ruling party in Venezuela was initially elected in 1998.

freedom and justice, and the president casts doubt on the importance of basic democratic values for our own society, more nations may turn to China, a rising alternative to US leadership. The Chinese Communist Party has welcomed this trend, offering its authoritarian system as a model for developing nations. The resulting damage to the liberal international order—a system of alliances, norms, and institutions built up under Trump's predecessors to ensure peace and prosperity after World War II—will not be easily repaired after he leaves office.

Neither despair nor complacency

Ours is a well-established and resilient democracy, and we can see the effect of its antibodies on the viruses infecting it. The judiciary has repeatedly checked the power of the president, and the press has exposed his actions to public scrutiny. Protests and other forms of civic mobilization against administration policies are large and robust. More people turned out for the midterm elections than in previous years, and there is a growing awareness of the threat that authoritarian practices pose to Americans.

Yet the pressure on our system is as serious as any experienced in living memory. We cannot take for granted that institutional bulwarks against abuse of power will retain their strength, or that our democracy will endure perpetually. Rarely has the need to defend its rules and norms been more urgent. Congress must perform more scrupulous oversight of the administration than it has to date. The courts must continue to resist pressures on their independence. The media must maintain their vigorous reporting even as they defend their constitutional prerogatives. And citizens, including Americans who are typically reluctant to engage in the public square, must be alert to new infringements on their rights and the rule of law, and demand that their elected representatives protect democratic values at home and abroad.

Freedom House will also be watching and speaking out in defense of US democracy. When leaders like Mohammed bin Salman or Victor Orbán take actions that threaten human liberty, it is our mission to document their abuses and condemn them. We must do no less when the threats come from closer to home.

Recommendations for Democracies

Democracies face threats at home and abroad. A crisis of confidence in open societies is sapping faith in democracy as a system. Domestic attacks on key institutions—the judiciary, the media, and electoral mechanisms—are undermining the foundations of democracy. At the same time, a global assault on the norms of democracy, led by an increasingly assertive China, challenges their spread around the world.

Only by strengthening democracy at home, and standing together in its defense around the world, can democracies protect their values and preserve their ability to expand freedom globally. The following recommendations are intended to provide a framework for democratic countries as they pursue these twin goals.

Strengthening and Protecting Core Values in Established Democracies

- **Respect human rights at home.** Attacks by elected leaders on democratic institutions—including the press, an independent judiciary, and due process of law—undermine faith in democracy around the world. Democratic leaders should demonstrate respect for fundamental norms at home, including by welcoming media scrutiny and fact-based reporting as an aid to good governance, enforcing robust protections against corruption and conflicts of interest, easing rather than obstructing citizens' participation in elections, and dedicating the time and resources necessary to ensure that all migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers receive fair and proper treatment under the law.
- **Invest in civic education.** To protect freedom domestically and build support for an informed foreign policy, it is essential to foster a stronger public understanding of democratic principles—especially among young people. In the United States, new legislation could require each state to develop basic content and benchmarks of achievement for civic education, including instruction on the fundamental tenets of democracy. In the absence of new legislation, the US Department of Education should, to the extent possible, make funding available to states for civic education that focuses on democratic principles.
- **Strengthen laws that guard against foreign influence over government officials.** Legislative proposals requiring greater transparency about officials' personal finances and campaign donations, more rigorous standards for the disclosure of conflicts of interest, and the establishment of a clear code of conduct for engagement with foreign officials can help insulate governments from foreign attempts to subvert democratic institutions. In the United States, this could include passing legislation to enforce the principles of the constitution's foreign emoluments clause, closing loopholes in rules on reporting foreign influence, and modernizing financial disclosure requirements for elected officials.
- **Invest in elections infrastructure to guard against foreign interference in balloting.** In the United States, funding should focus on replacing outdated voting machines, strengthening cybersecurity for existing systems, and improving the technological expertise of state elections staff.
- **Require social media companies to report foreign efforts to spread online disinformation and propaganda.** Social media companies that operate in the United States should be required to report regularly on efforts by foreign governments and nonstate actors to manipulate American public opinion and undercut democracy by spreading disinformation and propaganda on their platforms.

The US government should assess which entities would be the most appropriate to receive these reports, since this information is of interest across jurisdictions, including to intelligence agencies, Congress, the US State Department’s Global Engagement Center, the Securities and Exchange Commission, and the Department of Justice. The US government should carefully decide on the types and sizes of social media companies required to comply, the data they must submit, and appropriate penalties for noncompliance. The entity receiving the information should report findings regularly to the public and should make the data publicly available to researchers, while ensuring the protection of users’ privacy.

Defending and Expanding Democracy around the World

- **Invest in alliances with other democracies, and in multilateral institutions.** Confronting authoritarian and antiliberal trends globally requires a united front among democratic nations. Democracies are a beacon of freedom that others emulate, and their policies help to shape international standards. By vocally emphasizing their shared values and coordinating their aid and public diplomacy efforts, democratic countries can offer a consistent, attainable alternative to repression and coercion. They can reinforce this collective effort and constrain the behavior of autocratic powers by investing in multilateral institutions. Starting from the assumption that a country’s individual sovereignty is threatened by deep cooperation with allies will only isolate democracies from one another, leaving them weaker and less capable of meeting the challenge of resurgent authoritarianism.
- **Confront abuses of international institutions.** Illiberal leaders have grown more brazen in their attempts to manipulate international institutions for their own ends. Among other tactics, they have exploited Interpol to pursue political dissidents in exile, blocked civil society participation in multilateral bodies, and engineered the insertion or deletion of key phrasing in documents that affect international law and governance. (For example, China’s use of the phrase “mutually beneficial cooperation” in a resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council could be interpreted to mean refraining from criticizing another state’s human rights record.) Democratic states should firmly oppose such efforts, ensuring that dissidents are not wrongly handed

over to their persecutors, and forming alliances within international bodies to prevent authoritarian regimes from warping the original missions of these institutions and undermining the fundamental rights they were created to uphold.

- **Encourage and protect journalists and freedom of the press.** A free and vibrant media sector is a foundational element of a healthy democratic system. Citizens should have access to fact-based information—both in traditional news sources and on social media—in order to understand how their governments function and to hold their leaders accountable for their words and actions. Democratic governments can help protect media freedom by reaffirming the critical role of the press in furthering good governance, transparency, and the rule of law, pushing back against anti-media rhetoric that aims to strip journalists of legitimacy, supporting programs to strengthen the technical capacity of journalists around the world, and ensuring that attacks on journalists are prosecuted.
- **Be prepared to promptly challenge preelection rights abuses.** Crackdowns on the political opposition and other perceived opponents of the government often occur before elections. The international community should be especially vigilant when monitoring preelection periods in countries where internet blocking, media restrictions, suppression of protests, or arrests of opposition candidates are likely. If such misconduct occurs, international leaders should immediately and publicly condemn the action, press the government to reverse course, and work to assist the victims. Specific responses could include publicly calling for the release of those wrongly imprisoned, sending embassy officials to monitor court proceedings, and—in extreme cases—issuing emergency humanitarian visas for those under attack.
- **Impose targeted sanctions on individuals and entities involved in human rights abuses and acts of corruption.** In the United States, a law known as the Global Magnitsky Act allows authorities to block visas for and freeze the assets of any person or entity—including private companies—that has engaged in or supported corruption or human rights abuses, providing a measure of accountability for the perpetrators without harming the general population. Countries with similar laws should robustly enforce them, and legislatures in countries without such laws should seek to pass them.

- **Emphasize democracy-strengthening programs in foreign assistance.** Democratic governance is a key component of economic development and a basic necessity for long-term success, requiring active public participation. In addition to critical institution-building efforts—such as strengthening the rule of law, bolstering judicial independence, and ensuring free, fair, transparent, and inclusive elections—democracy programs should prioritize engaging and empowering local citizens so that institutional investments are effective and sustainable. A recent poll in the United States conducted by Freedom House, the George W. Bush Institute, and the Penn Biden Center found that 71 percent of respondents are in favor of the US government taking steps to support democracy and human rights in other countries.
- **Focus on countries at critical junctures.** These include countries that have experienced recent expansions in freedom, such as Angola, Ethiopia, Armenia, and Ecuador, as well as countries in which democratic progress is threatened, such as Senegal, Tanzania, and Tunisia. Foreign assistance for these countries should prioritize and incentivize democratic reforms designed to consolidate gains, address threats, and prevent backsliding. Policymakers should engage in high-level public diplomacy to signal international commitment to democratic progress, and assist democratically inclined leaders in delivering the tangible expansion of political rights and civil liberties. Consistency and predictability of both funding and diplomatic engagement are critical to long-term success for states at tipping points.

Recommendations for the Private Sector

The internet and other digital technologies have become ubiquitous as a means of accessing information, communicating, and participating in public debates. Consequently, technology and social media companies play an increasingly important role in sustaining—or weakening—democracy. They have a special responsibility to be mindful of the impact their business activities may have on democracy and human rights. Private companies should:

- **Adhere to the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.** This includes avoiding commercial relationships with authoritarian governments that force them to violate fundamental rights. Instead, companies should commit to respecting the human rights of their customers and workers. As part of this effort, they should conduct periodic assessments to help them fully understand the effects of their products and activities. Upon completion of these assessments, companies should develop actionable plans to remedy any evident or potential harm. Given its unique position in authoritarian settings, the technology sector in particular should refuse business arrangements that require either active complicity in or passive acceptance of political censorship and information controls.
- **Use internal expertise to help counter Chinese state censorship and protect the public.** The technology sector should assist users in China by developing accessible tools that keep pace with innovations by the Chinese government and complicit Chinese firms. For example, leading international companies could develop mobile phone applications that enhance digital security, enable the sharing of images in a way that evades artificial intelligence-driven censorship, and incorporate circumvention capabilities into apps focused on other services.

The promise of democracy
remains real and powerful.
Broadening its reach is one of
the great causes of our time.





Freedom House is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that supports democratic change, monitors freedom, and advocates for democracy and human rights.

1850 M Street NW, 11th Floor
Washington, DC 20036

111 John Street, Suite 810
New York, NY 10038

www.freedomhouse.org
facebook.com/FreedomHouseDC
[@FreedomHouse](https://twitter.com/FreedomHouse)
202.296.5101 | info@freedomhouse.org