

USA

US no longer a 'full democracy' in 2016 Democracy Index: Where do we go from here?

The Economist Intelligence Unit downgraded the United States to a 'flawed democracy,' reflecting record levels of political polarization and a widespread lack of confidence in government. But things may not be as bleak as they appear.



Keith Stakovic/AP | Caption

Gretel Kauffman

Staff |  @gretelkauffman

JANUARY 26, 2017 — The United States is no longer a "full democracy," according to the 2016 Democracy Index.

The annual report released Wednesday by the Britain-based Economist Intelligence Unit downgraded the US to a "flawed democracy," placing it 21st in the international rankings. The grading process was based on five categories: electoral process and pluralism, functioning of government, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties.

While the list was published in the first week of Donald Trump's presidency, the report emphasized that President Trump's polarizing election victory was a symptom – not a cause – of the United States' new "flawed democracy" status. Indeed, the report noted, the US had been "teetering on the brink of becoming a flawed democracy" for years amid a decades-long decline in the American public's confidence in government, and would have earned the same ranking even if 2016 had not been an election year.

"Trust in political institutions is an essential component of well-functioning democracies," the report stated. "Yet surveys by Pew, Gallup and other polling agencies have confirmed that public confidence in government has slumped to historic lows in the U.S. This has had a corrosive effect on the quality of democracy."

As partisan animosity hits record highs and many have called into question the electorate system that allowed a historically unpopular candidate to take the White House, restoring faith in American democracy may seem a daunting task. But some observers see hope for the future in local, community-oriented efforts to promote civic engagement and a sense of unity.

Confidence in US government institutions has dropped steadily over the past seven decades, with only occasional increases, according to polling data. Just 19 percent of Americans in a 2015 Pew survey reported trusting the federal

government at least most of the time, compared to 73 percent of respondents in a similar 1958 poll. In one October 2016 survey, 40 percent of registered voters said they had lost faith in American democracy.

Less trust in government isn't inherently bad for democracy, as it may indicate a more informed electorate, notes Lynn Vavreck, a professor of political science and communications at the University of California, Los Angeles.

"[S]ome of the recent decline may have less to do with how the government has disappointed people and more to do with an increasing knowledge of how the government works," Professor Vavreck writes for The New York Times. "It is of some concern that trust in government is objectively low. But playing a role in the background is a steady march away from government opaqueness – a longstanding American tradition dating to the candid submission of grievances outlined in the Declaration of Independence."

But the steady decline in confidence in government – kickstarted by the Vietnam War in the 1960s and fueled by events such as the Watergate Hotel break-in and the energy crisis of the 1970s – has gone hand-in-hand with a rise in political polarization, a phenomenon that experts say further inhibits a healthy democratic system. Partisan animosity reached a record high in 2016, as the Monitor reported in June.

"When there's a lack of confidence and trust then you lose those values that hold society together and ... we lose sight of the common good," says Robert Denton, head of the communication department at Virginia Tech and co-author of "Social Fragmentation and the Decline of American Democracy: The End of the Social Contract," in a phone interview. "That erodes the fabric of democracy."

At first glance, the odds of recapturing a sense of national unity, or even national civility, may appear bleak – especially as Millennials, on average, tend to be less nationalistic than previous generations. But Professor Denton sees hope for

restoring cooperation and trust by starting locally and working up.

"To those who are the most despondent on both sides, I say we have to start now at the community level," he tells the Monitor. "What can we do in the community to address social injustice and income inequality? Can we feed the hungry? Take care of the sick? If we start having a sense of community again, that community can become a town, that town can become a city, that city can become a state, and that state can become a nation."

Brian Levin, director of the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University, San Bernardino, echoed a similar sentiment in a previous Monitor article, noting that leadership can often come from "the regular folk – from the bottom up, not necessarily from the top down."

"There's a certain type of civic communication," Mr. Levin said. "It's not just voting. It's becoming a part of an inclusive community...Don't look for the governor or the president to set the tone of your community. You set it."



