

Do Americans still believe in democracy?

By Amy Erica Smith April 9

What's up with democracy in America? Sometimes it seems that American politics grows more polarized and uncivil every month. Has American political culture taken an anti-democratic turn?

Historically, Americans take pride in their democratic traditions, and academics have agreed that democracy in this country is special. From Alexis de Tocqueville's 1800s classic "[Democracy in America](#)" to Almond and Verba's groundbreaking 1960s study "[The Civic Culture](#)," astute witnesses argue that Americans' political attitudes make U.S. democracy particularly robust. These works describe Americans' underlying belief in the legitimacy of the U.S. democratic system, regardless of whether they like or dislike current officeholders. Americans historically were willing to respect the democratic rules of the game and tolerate people with conflicting viewpoints.

How do you measure democracy?

AmericasBarometer surveys have studied civic cultures across the Western Hemisphere since 2006 — looking at new democracies taking root in Latin America as well as long-standing democracies in the United States and Canada. In 2014, U.S. democratic culture appeared relatively strong compared with other countries in the survey. However, these surveys showed a rapid decline in political tolerance among young adults between 2006 and 2014.

In addition, Americans as a whole became remarkably dissatisfied with the legitimacy of the political system during that period. It is unclear why this happened. Are the U.S. civic attitudes praised by de Tocqueville and Almond and Verba failing? If so, this could signal an increasingly turbulent period for American democracy.

How do you measure democracy? Every two years, the AmericasBarometer project monitors whether citizens in North and South America think their political systems are fundamentally legitimate — an attitude political scientists call "[system support](#)" — and assesses their levels of political tolerance.

The survey asks questions such as: Do you think your country's courts guarantee a fair trial? Do you think political institutions protect citizens' basic rights? Questions on [political tolerance](#) ask whether political enemies, including "people who only say bad

things about the system of government in your country,” should have basic political and civil rights, such as voting and free speech.

This assessment has been an effective barometer of civic culture. In Honduras, for example, scholars correctly predicted instability in advance of the 2009 coup.

Here’s how the U.S. ranks, comparatively

The figure below, based on the survey data, shows levels of system support and political tolerance across the Western Hemisphere in 2014, with the United States highlighted in red. So in 2014, political tolerance in the United States was very high — the highest in the hemisphere. However, the United States ranked 15th in the Western Hemisphere in system support, far lower than many countries with shorter democratic histories and lower levels of economic development.

These relatively low levels of system support in the United States seem to be something new. Figure 2 shows that system support declined 18 points on the 0-100 scale between 2006 and 2014, while political tolerance remained relatively stable, dropping just a few points.

If attitudes are changing, we might expect the most rapid changes among the youngest citizens. Youths often reflect cultural shifts first, and they are also more likely to engage in social conflict and protests. The right half of the figure directly above shows a 20-point drop in tolerance levels among adults ages 18 to 25 during the 2006-2014 period. But this group’s responses on system support matched the downward trend of the population as a whole.

Researchers at the AmericasBarometer often put system support and tolerance together to describe four types of citizens. “Dissatisfied Authoritarians” are below the midpoint on system support (hence “dissatisfied”) and are also below the midpoint on tolerance (hence “authoritarian”). “Satisfied Authoritarians” are low on tolerance but high on system support, “Dissatisfied Democrats” are high on tolerance but low on system support, and “Satisfied Democrats” are high on both system support and tolerance.

In the figure below, Dissatisfied Authoritarians and Satisfied Authoritarians are in the minority in all age groups but make up a larger share of the youngest age brackets.

AmericasBarometer research shows that as levels of both tolerance and system support dropped in other countries, citizens became more willing to dispense with democratic institutions. It’s interesting to see, in the figure below, that the percentage of U.S. respondents who agreed that it would be justifiable to close Congress “in very difficult times” more than doubled between 2010 and 2014.

Yes, we’re still democratic

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The survey data reveal some U.S. democratic strengths but also some genuine democratic weak spots. The country's many advantages include time-tested democratic institutions, a high level of economic development, and, yes, a still-robust democratic culture.

As observers from de Tocqueville to Almond and Verba argued, deep reservoirs of civil respect for disagreement can help the U.S. survive bouts of intolerance. Ultimately, these advantages are likely to be enough for American democracy to withstand relatively short-term variations in public support.

However, stresses on civic culture may make it harder to preserve a robust democracy in the United States in the future. If recent trends in democratic culture continue, American democracy could gradually erode — or suddenly break down.

Can these trends be reversed? Decades of research on civic education in long-standing, wealthy democracies and new, lower-income ones show that we can teach democracy. U.S. civic education has lagged in recent decades, however. A renewed emphasis on civics training in schools could help to shore up American democratic culture.

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