

Yes, our ‘flawed’ democracy just got downgraded. Here’s why.

[wp.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/02/23/yes-our-flawed-democracy-just-got-downgraded-heres-why/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/02/23/yes-our-flawed-democracy-just-got-downgraded-heres-why/)

By Dinorah Azpuru and Michael Hall



Voters on Nov. 8, 2016 received “I voted” stickers at Colin Powell Elementary School, in Centreville, Virginia. (Paul J. Richards/AFP/Getty Images)

In January, the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU)’s [Democracy Index](#) demoted the United States from “full democracy” to “flawed democracy.” That’s disturbing, but what does it mean?

A democracy index is an attempt to measure how democratic a country is, like a movie rating flags “adult” content, or a bond rating measures an individual bond’s risk. It may sound like typical academic overreach to put a number on democracy, but indexes can distinguish which countries are democracies and which are dictatorships — and define countries that are shades of gray between them.

[\[How do you measure democracy?\]](#)

The basic tenet of democracy, free and fair elections, is intrinsically part of all the democracy indexes nowadays. A number of organizations use a range of criteria to determine their indexes, so how does the EIU downgrade compare to these other indexes? We looked at some of the best known indexes for a comparison.

Democracy indexes tabulate the freedom to campaign and other political rights

The level of democracy in countries can vary across indexes, sometimes dramatically, as Seva Gunitsky discussed here in the [Monkey Cage](#). The democracy index with the most data is [Polity IV](#), with data for many countries going back to the 1940s. The [Freedom House](#) Index has data from the early 1970s onward. These are the indicators academics use most commonly.

Polity IV assigns scores to a handful of questions about a country's political institutions — How many people are free to campaign? What checks are on executive power? How competitive is campaigning? Polity IV assigns a score to each answer, then adds up a total score for that country ranging from 0 to 10.

Freedom House assigns scores ranging from 1 to 7 for two categories each, civil liberties and political rights. Using combined scores, Freedom House divides countries into rankings of “free,” “partly free” and “not free.”

[\[Open data and \(15 million!\) new measures of democracy\]](#)

The United States is still a democracy — and it's “Free”

According to Polity IV the United States, with a [score of 10 points](#), is still considered a full democracy, and it has always been. Freedom House has always ranked the United States a “free” country.

But Freedom House also produces an [aggregate score](#) combining a 40-point scale for political rights and a 60-point scale for civil liberties. The U.S. aggregate score is 89/100 — lower than Canada (99/100), the United Kingdom (95/100), Sweden (100/100) and most other Western democracies.

The [Global Democracy Ranking](#) and the EIU Democracy Index are newer indexes, and expand the criteria used to measure democracy. The Global Democracy Ranking measures the quality of democracy using a political dimension (civil liberties, gender political equality, press freedom, transparency and alternation of power) for 50 percent of the score — then tabulates five non-political dimensions for the other half of the score. Included are tallies of gender fairness and equality; wealth and quality of living of individuals and communities; knowledge (research, education, information); health and environmental sustainability.

[\[Do Americans still believe in democracy?\]](#)

In the 2016 Global Democracy Ranking, the United States isn't among the top 10 democratic countries in the world, and ranks lower than other advanced industrial democracies, as shown in Figure 1. The top three democracies in the world are Norway, Switzerland and Sweden.

Comparison Chart

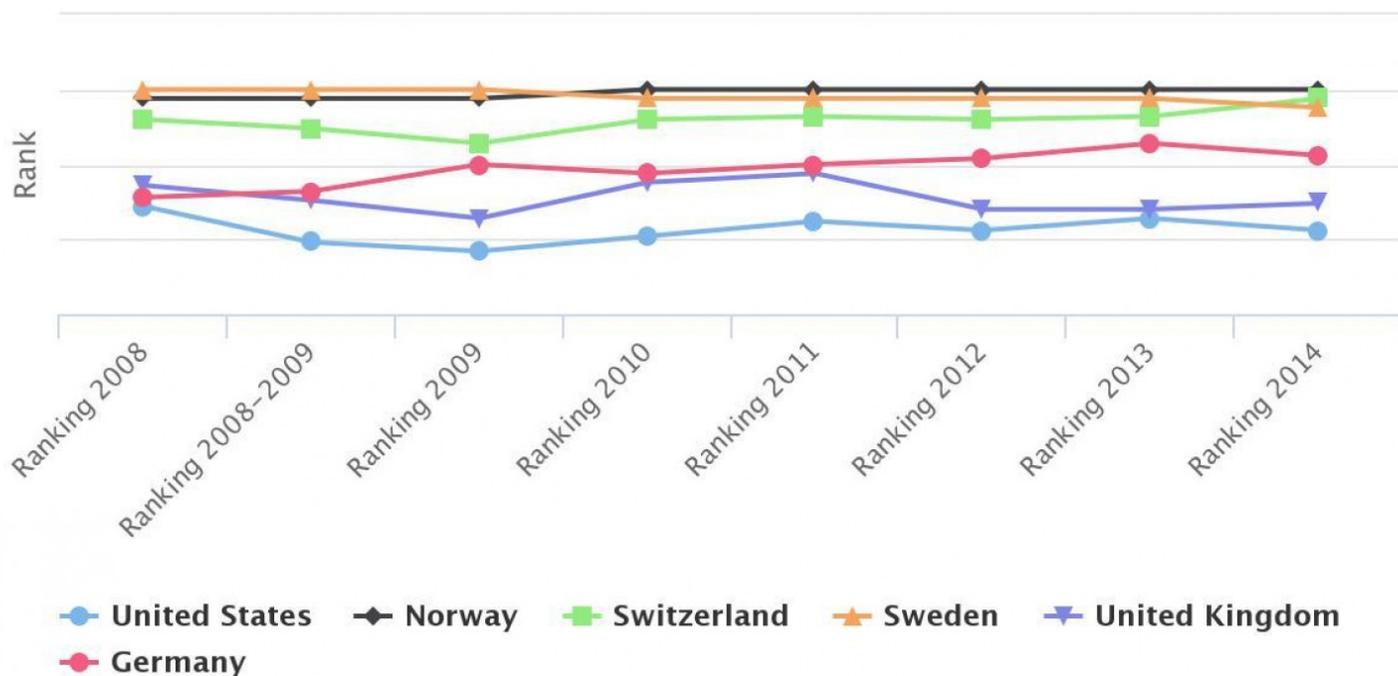


Figure 1. Global Democracy Ranking for the U.S. and other Advanced Democracies, 2016. The United States trails behind other advanced industrial democracies. Norway is the world's top democracy. Source: Global Democracy Index, <http://democracyranking.org/wordpress/rank/>.

The [EIU Democracy Index](#) in turn, is based on the ratings for 60 indicators, grouped into five categories: electoral process and pluralism; civil liberties; the functioning of government; political participation; and political culture.

Here's the main reason for the U.S. downgrade to the category of flawed democracy — there was a drop in the levels of trust in political parties, elected representatives and governmental institutions. EIU also ranks France and Italy as flawed democracies.

The [EIU Report](#) explains, "Trust in political institutions is an essential component of well-functioning democracies. 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 in the U.S., as reflected in the decline in the U.S. score in the Democracy Index."

The EIU analysis is consistent with 2014 data from the [AmericasBarometer](#), a Vanderbilt University-based academic survey of citizens in Western Hemisphere countries. Figure 2 shows that U.S. trust in Congress is lower than in most other countries, other than Peru.

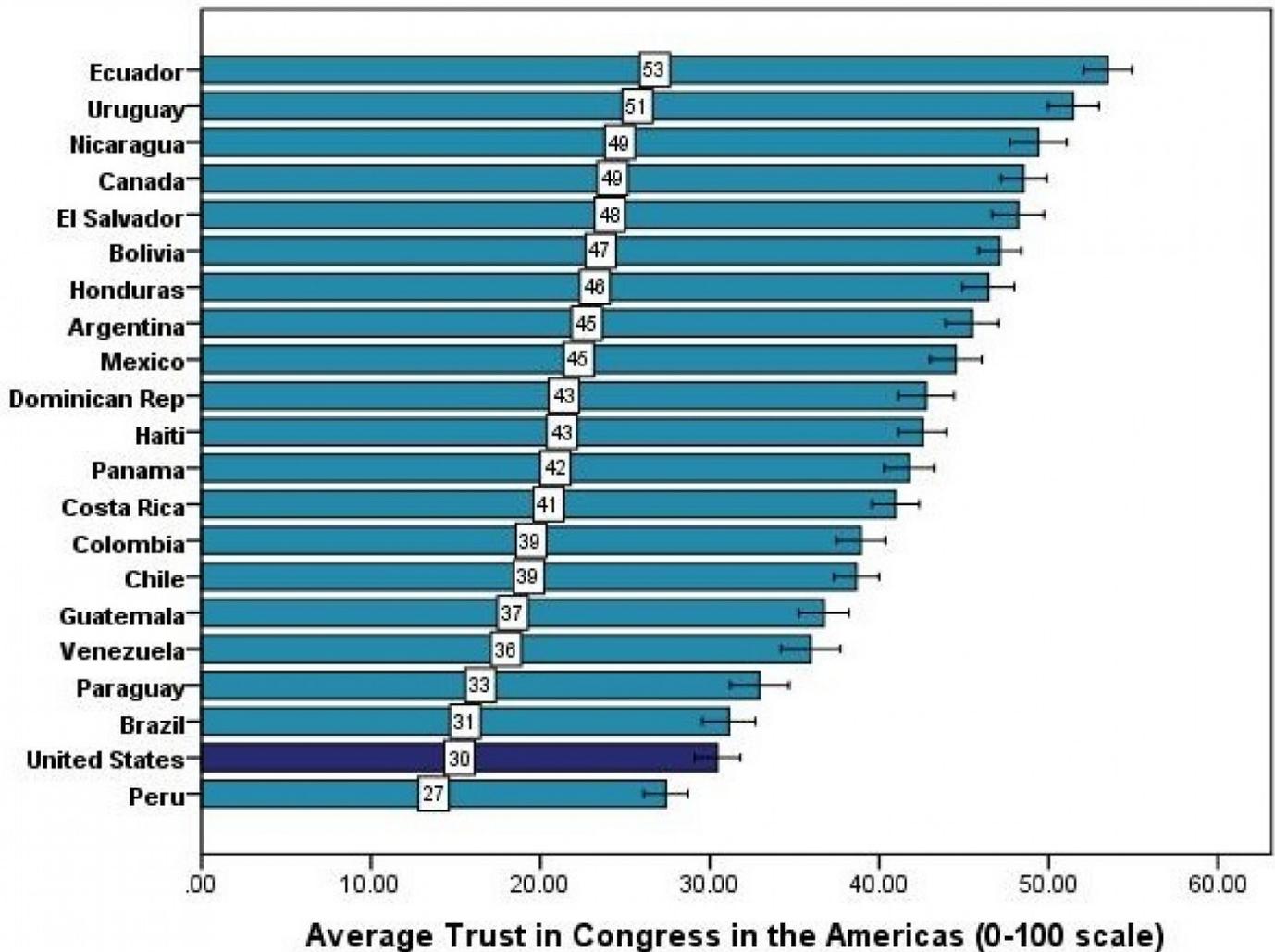


Figure 2. Average Trust in Congress in the Americas in 2014. AmericasBarometer surveys, conducted every two years, monitor how citizens in North and South America feel about their political systems. Responses in 2014 suggest that U.S. citizens are less trustful of their Congress, compared to citizens in other countries. Source: Dinorah Azpuru and Michael Hall, using 2014 AmericasBarometer data. Error bars 95% CI.

This low ranking is somewhat surprising, given that several countries in the list are new democracies. Some, like Venezuela, rank somewhere between democracy and dictatorship. The only other advanced industrial democracy on the list, Canada (49/100 points), ranks much higher than the United States (30/100).

Other indexes measure more specific components of democracy, such as the quality of elections. The [Electoral Integrity Index](#) takes this approach, and ranks the United States [lower than other Western democracies](#).

In summary, there are reasons for concern about the strength of American democracy. True, only one of these indexes has actually demoted the United States at this point — but other democracy indexes remind us that U.S. democracy is less than perfect. In fact, indexes that consider a broad range of factors don't rate the United States at the top of the list, but rank other Western democracies higher.

A key takeaway here, perhaps, is that democracy is always a work in progress. The EIU findings suggest that one major challenge for U.S. elected representatives is to overcome the high levels of distrust in democratic institutions in the years ahead. Commitments to freedom of expression, press freedom, checks and balances, and electoral

integrity are all an important part of citizen confidence in their democracies.

Dinorah Azpuru and Michael Hall are associate professors of political science and international relations at Wichita State University.