

A new study shows American democracy is getting weaker. And not because of Trump.

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Every year, the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), the research arm of the company that publishes the Economist magazine, issues a report assessing the state of democracy in countries around the world. [This year's report](#), released on Wednesday morning, has a striking finding: The United States has, for the first time, been rated as a “flawed” rather than “full” democracy.

You'd think, given the timing, that the election of Donald Trump is the reason

why. But that's not it. The report is based on a quantitative metric, linked to survey data and policy, that doesn't incorporate the election results.

“The decline in the US democracy score reflects an erosion of confidence in government and public institutions over many years,” the report states. “[Trump's] candidacy was not the cause of the deterioration in trust but rather a consequence of it.”

This report isn't just a bunch of liberals hyperventilating about Trump, then. It's one piece of evidence that something deeper is going wrong in American democracy.

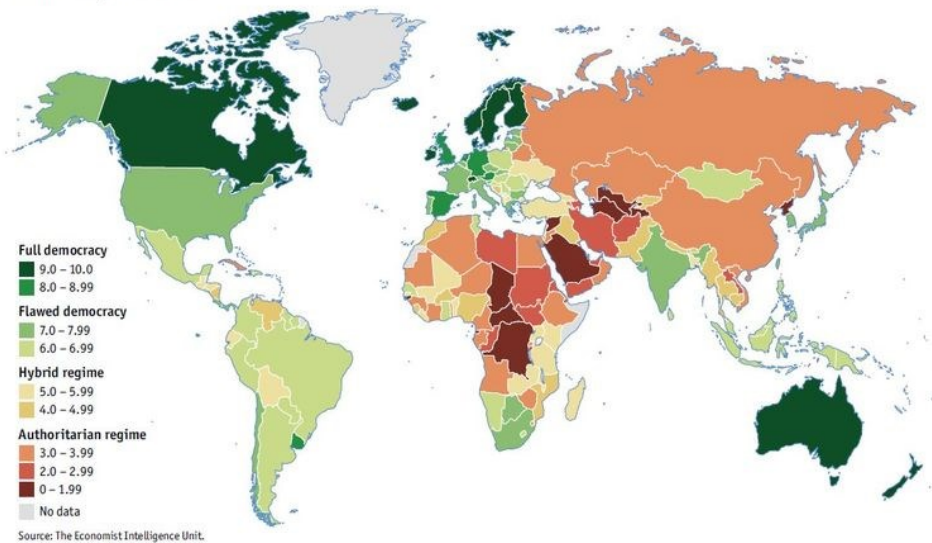
What the EIU found, and why it matters

The EIU's rating ranks countries on a 10-point scale. Countries that rank between eight and 10 are “full democracies,” while countries between six and 7.9 are “flawed democracies” (below that are various shades of nondemocracy). The rankings are determined by quantitative measures of five different parts of democracy: “electoral process and pluralism; civil liberties; the functioning of government; political participation; and political culture.”

Prior to this year, the United States had scored extremely highly on all of these metrics, leading to a total ranking above eight each year. But this year, it scored a 7.98 — just barely falling into the “flawed democracy” category.

The US scores particularly poorly on “the functioning of government” (7.14) and “political participation” (7.22). This, according to the EIU, reflects a steep decline in American citizens' faith in their government.

Democracy Index 2016



“According to the Pew Research Centre, public trust in government has been on a steady downward trend since shortly after the September 11 attacks in 2001,” the report explains. It continues:

Survey data from Pew and Gallup and other polling agencies reveal a protracted and persistent decline in levels of popular confidence in political institutions and parties.

Pew surveys show that public trust

in government remains close to historic lows, at 19%, and Gallup polls revealed that popular confidence in political leaders and the mass media dropped to its lowest level in polling history in 2016.

So the report isn't saying the US is becoming anti-democratic, in the sense that it's suspending civil liberties, failing to hold free elections, or anything dramatic like that. Rather, it's that the democratic system is weakening, because its citizens have come to believe that its key institutions are not working for them.

The United States has some impressive company in the “flawed democracy” category: Japan and France, for example, have scores roughly identical to America's (Japan is at 7.99, France is at 7.92). But those countries, too, have their problems. On one respected metric of press freedom, Japan ranks lower than quasi-authoritarian Tanzania. France has been running a civil liberties-restricting state of emergency, permitting (among other things) searches of homes without warrants, since the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris.

The point here, then, is that democracy is not just a question of whether you hold elections or you don't. Rather, it's that there are a lot of factors that go into a democracy working the way that it's supposed to, including respect for civil liberties and citizens' faith in their country's democratic system. As those things erode, democracies become weaker.

The real takeaway from America's downgrading is not “American democracy is over.” It's that democracy in America, and an alarming number of other advanced democracies, is not functioning as well as it should — and that should worry us.

<http://www.vox.com/world/2017/1/25/14385728/economist-intelligence-unit-american-democracy-2016>