

# Democracy under Siege

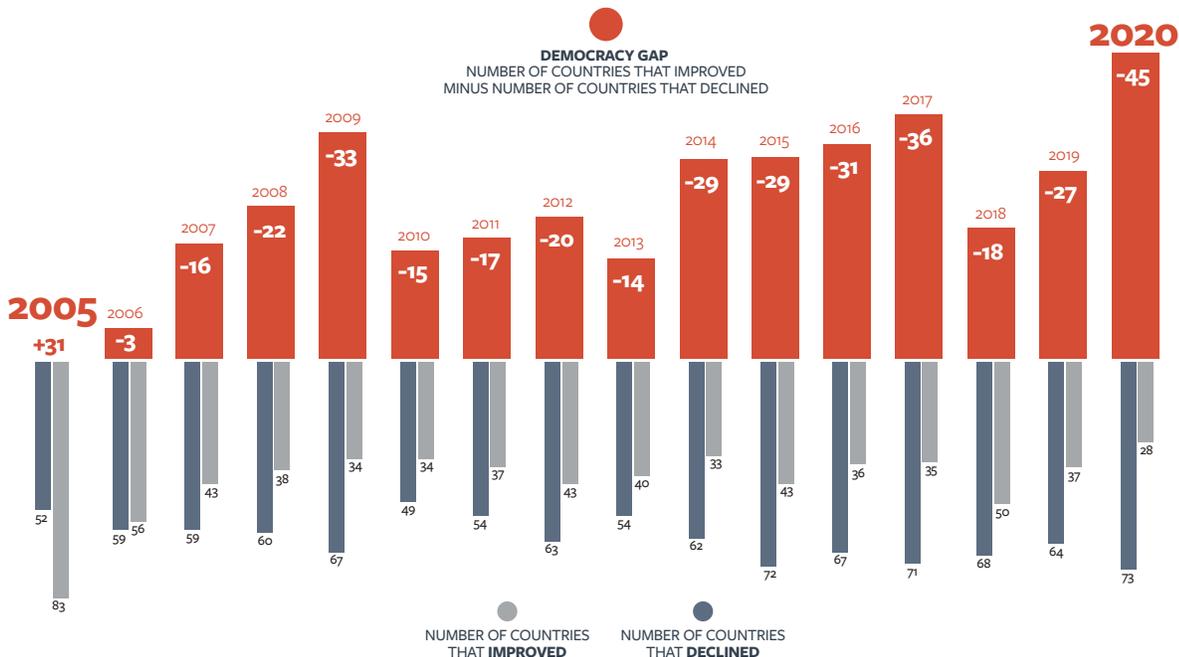
By Sarah Repucci and Amy Slipowitz

Authoritarian actors grew bolder during 2020 as major democracies turned inward, contributing to the 15th consecutive year of decline in global freedom. Over the past year, oppressive and often violent authoritarian forces tipped the international order in their favor time and again, exploiting both the advantages of nondemocratic systems and the weaknesses in ailing democracies. In a variety of environments, flickers of hope were extinguished, contributing to a new global status quo in which acts of repression went unpunished and democracy’s advocates were increasingly isolated.

Of the 195 independent countries assessed by *Freedom in the World*, 73 experienced aggregate score declines and just 28 made gains, the widest margin of its kind during the 15-year period of decline. There are now 54 Not Free countries, accounting for 38 percent of the world’s population, the highest share since the decline began.

## A GROWING DEMOCRACY GAP: 15 YEARS OF DECLINE

Countries with aggregate score declines in *Freedom in the World* have outnumbered those with gains every year for the past 15 years.

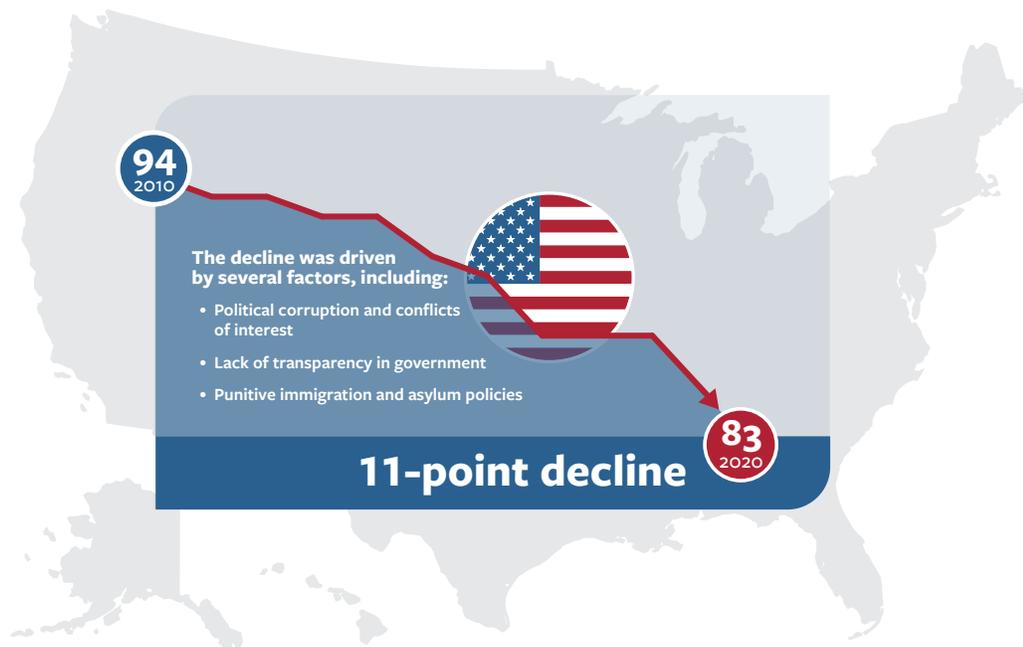


## Key Global Findings:

- The malign influence of the regime in China, the world’s most populous dictatorship, was especially profound in 2020. Its efforts featured increased meddling in the domestic political discourse of foreign democracies and transnational extensions of rights abuses common in mainland China. Meanwhile, the Chinese regime has gained clout in multilateral institutions such as the UN Human Rights Council, pushing a vision of so-called noninterference that allows abuses of democratic principles and human rights standards to go unpunished while the formation of autocratic alliances is promoted.
- As authoritarians generally enjoy impunity for their abuses and seize new opportunities to consolidate power or crush dissent, promising democratic movements have faced major setbacks as a result. In **Belarus**, massive prodemocracy protests met with brutal crackdowns by a government that largely disregarded international criticism. The armed conflict in **Ethiopia’s** Tigray Region dashed hopes for the tentative political opening in that country since 2018.
- **India’s** status changed from Free to Partly Free, meaning less than 20 percent of the world’s people now live in a Free country—the smallest proportion since 1995. Indians’ political rights and civil liberties have been eroding since Narendra Modi became prime minister in 2014. His Hindu nationalist government has presided over increased pressure on human rights organizations, rising intimidation of academics and journalists, and a spate of bigoted attacks—including lynchings—aimed at Muslims.

### UNITED STATES IN DECLINE

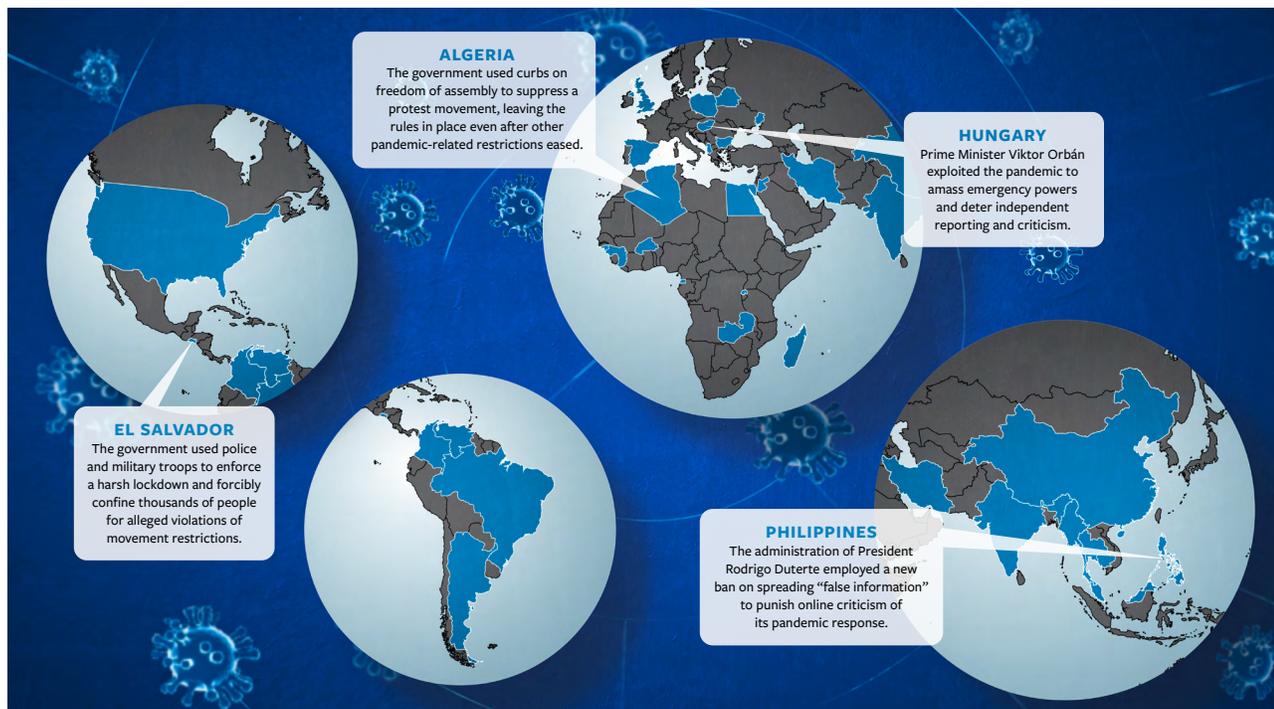
Over the past 10 years, the United States’ aggregate *Freedom in the World* score has declined by 11 points, placing it among the 25 countries that have suffered the largest declines in this period.



Note: The US received a score of 94 in the 2011 edition of *Freedom in the World*, covering the events of 2010. It received a score of 83 in the 2021 edition, covering 2020. All scores are on a scale of 0 to 100.

## THE PANDEMIC'S IMPACT ON GLOBAL DEMOCRACY

Many governments withheld or distorted crucial information, imposed excessive or abusive lockdown rules, or used COVID-19 as cover to consolidate power and suppress dissent. Some of these developments could have an impact on democracy that outlasts the pandemic itself.



The map highlights countries that suffered score declines related to the pandemic in *Freedom in the World 2021*.

- COVID-19 has exacerbated the global decline in freedom. The outbreak exposed weaknesses across all the pillars of democracy, from elections and the rule of law to egregiously disproportionate restrictions on freedoms of assembly and movement. Ultimately, the changes precipitated by the pandemic left many societies—with varied regime types, income levels, and demographics—in worse political condition; with more pronounced racial, ethnic, and gender inequalities; and vulnerable to long-term effects.
- In the **United States**, outgoing president Donald Trump’s shocking attempts to turn his election loss—culminating in his incitement of rioters who stormed the Capitol as Congress met to confirm the results in January 2021—further damaged the United States’ credibility abroad and underscored the menace of political polarization and extremism in the country. Yet key institutions held firm, and the country escaped the worst. The Biden administration, the new Congress, and American civil society must work hard to fortify American democracy by strengthening and expanding political rights and civil liberties for all.
- Despite the many losses for freedom recorded by *Freedom in the World* during 2020, people around the globe remained committed to fighting for their rights, and democracy continued to demonstrate its remarkable resilience. A number of countries held successful elections, independent courts provided checks on executive overreach, journalists in even the most repressive environments investigated government transgressions, and activists persisted in calling out undemocratic practices.

## Countries in the Spotlight

The following countries—and one territory—featured important developments in 2020 that affected their democratic trajectory, and deserve special scrutiny in 2021.



**Armenia:** Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan’s reformist government is in political jeopardy as the country grapples with the fallout from the war with Azerbaijan.



**Côte d’Ivoire:** President Alassane Ouattara defied constitutional term limits and secured election to a third term in a process marred by candidate disqualifications, an opposition boycott, and widespread political violence.



**El Salvador:** President Nayib Bukele has used security forces to strongarm the parliament and enforce brutal pandemic-related restrictions on movement.



**Ethiopia:** The initially reformist government responded to political and ethnic unrest with mass arrests and a military offensive in the Tigray Region, leading to widespread and egregious human rights violations.



**Hong Kong:** Beijing’s imposition of a draconian National Security Law in 2020 has resulted in arrests of prodemocracy activists, increased self-censorship, and a weakening of due process safeguards.



**Jordan:** Authorities disbanded a major teachers’ union and enforced excessive restrictions on assembly during the pandemic, suppressing dissent and harming the quality of parliamentary elections.



**Malawi:** A flawed 2019 election was annulled by the Constitutional Court, the rerun election was better managed, and the resulting government made progress in fighting corruption.



**North Macedonia:** The recently reelected government of Prime Minister Zoran Zaev has reversed years of democratic backsliding, but the country continues to be denied a chance to join the European Union.



**Peru:** The dubious impeachment of one president was quickly followed by the resignation of his replacement, highlighting deep political dysfunction that has disrupted anticorruption efforts.



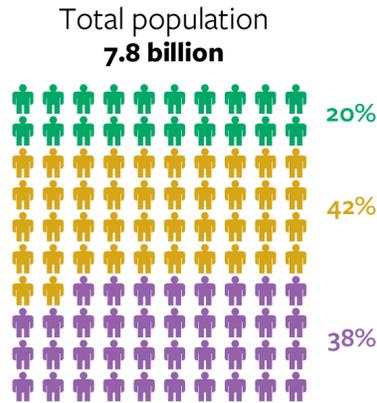
**Sri Lanka:** A pandemic-related delay in elections allowed President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to rule without a legislature for five months, and once elected, the new parliament approved constitutional amendments to expand the president’s authority.

### Worst of the Worst

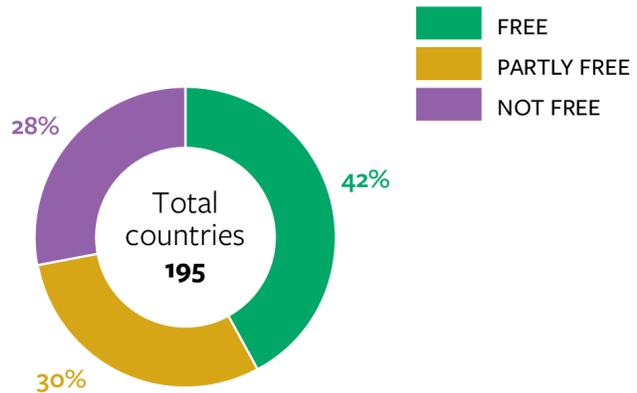
Of the 54 countries designated as Not Free, the following 12 have the worst aggregate scores for political rights and civil liberties.

Country	Aggregate Score
Syria	1
Eritrea	2
South Sudan	2
Turkmenistan	2
North Korea	3
Equatorial Guinea	5
Saudi Arabia	7
Somalia	7
Tajikistan	8
Central African Republic	9
China	9
Libya	9

**GLOBAL: STATUS BY POPULATION**



**GLOBAL: STATUS BY COUNTRY**



**Freedom in the World 2021 Status Changes**

**India**

India's status declined from Free to Partly Free due to a multiyear pattern in which the Hindu nationalist government and its allies presided over rising violence and discriminatory policies affecting the Muslim population and pursued a crackdown on expressions of dissent by the media, academics, civil society groups, and protesters.

**Jordan**

Jordan's status declined from Partly Free to Not Free due to harsh new restrictions on freedom of assembly, a crackdown on the teachers' union following a series of strikes and protests, and factors including a lack of adequate preparations that harmed the quality of parliamentary elections during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Kyrgyzstan**

Kyrgyzstan's status declined from Partly Free to Not Free because the aftermath of deeply flawed parliamentary elections featured significant political violence and intimidation that culminated in the irregular seizure of power by a nationalist leader and convicted felon who had been freed from prison by supporters.

**Mali**

Mali's status declined from Partly Free to Not Free due to legislative elections that were marred by political violence and a subsequent military coup that removed the country's elected civilian leadership.

**Peru**

Peru's status declined from Free to Partly Free due to extended political clashes between the presidency and Congress since 2017 that have heavily disrupted governance and anticorruption efforts, strained the country's constitutional order, and resulted in an irregular succession of four presidents within three years.

**Seychelles**

The Seychelles' status improved from Partly Free to Free because a strengthened electoral framework contributed to a more open and competitive presidential election, resulting in the country's first transfer of power to an opposition party.

**Thailand**

Thailand's status declined from Partly Free to Not Free due to the dissolution of a popular opposition party that had performed well in the 2019 elections, and the military-dominated government's crackdown on youth-led protests calling for democratic reforms.

**Zimbabwe**

Zimbabwe's status declined from Partly Free to Not Free due to the authorities' intensifying persecution of opposition figures and civic activists.

## Regional Trends

---

In addition to those listed above, the following countries saw developments of regional significance.

### AMERICAS:

- People in a number of countries in the Americas faced violence and other abuses in the enforcement of harsh COVID-19 lockdowns. Police and military units in **El Salvador** and **Venezuela** reportedly engaged in arbitrary detentions and torture, while paramilitary groups policed civilian movement in Venezuela and **Colombia**.
- The presidential election in **Bolivia** was administered impartially, and the results were recognized by all competing parties, capping a period of serious political turmoil.

### ASIA-PACIFIC:

- In the **Philippines**, President Rodrigo Duterte's government adopted a vaguely worded new antiterrorism law that allowed people to be arbitrarily labeled as terrorists and detained without a warrant or charges, including for speech-related offenses.
- Even before the February 2021 coup in **Myanmar**, students and activists there experienced an uptick in detentions for their involvement in public protests during 2020, while an extended internet shutdown in Rakhine State made it difficult for people to organize online and gather in public.

### EURASIA:

- Fraudulent parliamentary elections in **Kyrgyzstan** touched off protests that were quickly co-opted by criminal elements, and Sadyr Japarov—a nationalist politician serving time on a kidnapping conviction—seized power as both prime minister and president.
- In **Russia**, President Vladimir Putin was handed the right to stay in power through 2036 in a rigged referendum, with official results showing 78 percent approval.

### EUROPE:

- In **Poland**, the ruling party cited the health crisis as justification for an illegal, last-minute attempt to bypass the electoral commission and unilaterally arrange postal voting for the presidential election. Though this failed and the election was held at a later date, it was marred by the misuse of state resources and criminal charges against LGBT+ activists.
- **Hungary's** parliament handed expansive emergency powers to Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, ostensibly so the government could better respond to COVID-19.

## MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA:

- The **Iranian** regime was especially opaque in its response to COVID-19, using censorship and prosecutions to suppress independent reporting on the true extent of one of the region's largest early outbreaks.
- Lack of state accountability was also linked to the loss of human life in **Lebanon**, where a series of government failures led to a tremendous chemical explosion in Beirut's port complex. An investigation into the blast encountered considerable resistance from incumbent political forces.

## SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA:

- Important democratic progress was reported in **Sudan**, whose ongoing reforms improved academic freedom, banned female genital mutilation, and repealed a law restricting women's travel abroad.
- Accusations of fraud and the use of COVID-19 restrictions to hinder voter registration cast doubt on the presidential election in **Guinea**, where the incumbent secured a third term after engineering a referendum to lift term limits.

## DASHED HOPES

Over the past year, embers of hope were extinguished in countries and territories that once seemed poised to make democratic gains.



# Policy Recommendations

---

## NURTURING OPPORTUNITIES FOR GLOBAL DEMOCRACY

---

### **Support civil society and grassroots movements**

**calling for democracy.** Democratic governments should provide vocal, public support for grassroots prodemocracy movements, and respond to any violent crackdown by authorities with targeted sanctions, reduced or conditioned foreign assistance, and public condemnation.

### **Support free and independent media, and protect**

**access to information.** In the United States, the proposed Universal Press Freedom Act would prioritize the promotion of press freedom worldwide by creating an ambassador-at-large position to coordinate US foreign policy engagement on global press freedom issues. The US Agency for Global Media (USAGM), which operates the United States' five publicly funded media organizations, should ensure editorial independence at these organizations by restoring the "firewall rule." This rule, which protected against political interference in news reporting by agency leadership, was repealed in December.

### **Emphasize democracy-strengthening programs in**

**foreign assistance.** When disbursing aid, democracies should select priorities based on recognition of what can realistically be achieved through external assistance, with emphasis on long-term, locally driven, and evidence-based solutions.

### **Focus on countries and territories at critical junctures.**

To signal international commitment to defending democracy, policymakers from democratic nations should engage in high-level public diplomacy with countries that have experienced recent expansions in freedom or where democratic progress is threatened. Funding should help democratically inclined leaders and local civil society organizations deliver tangible expansions of political rights and civil liberties.

### **Invest in alliances with other democracies, and in**

**multilateral institutions.** Democracies should work together to promote their shared values and constrain autocratic powers by coordinating aid and public diplomacy efforts, including by bolstering initiatives that promote transparency and accountability in governance, and by issuing joint statements condemning human rights violations.

### **Strengthen public support for democratic principles**

**by investing in civic education.** 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 US 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.

## COUNTERING THREATS TO GLOBAL DEMOCRACY

---

### **Utilize targeted sanctions as part of a comprehensive strategy of accountability for human rights**

**abusers and corrupt officials.** The US Congress should reauthorize the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act (22 USC 2656 note), which allows for visa bans and asset freezes on individuals and entities engaged in human rights abuses and corruption. Reauthorization should eliminate the December 23, 2022, sunset and codify Executive Order 13818, which enables the United States to impose sanctions for serious human rights abuses. This term encompasses a greater number of abuses than the

more restrictive threshold of gross violations of human rights, the standard included in the Global Magnitsky Act in its original form. The US Congress and Executive Branch should work together to ensure robust funding for the enforcement of sanctions.

### **Make the fight against kleptocracy and international corruption a key priority.**

The United States passed groundbreaking legislation in 2020 that ended the ability of corrupt actors to hide stolen funds behind anonymous shell corporations. The United States should ensure this

law is fully enforced. The US Congress should also pass the CROOK Act (H.R. 402), which would establish an action fund to offer financial assistance to foreign countries during historic windows of opportunity for anticorruption reforms; and the Combatting Global Corruption Act (S. 14) which would require the US government to assess the extent of corruption around the world and produce a tiered list of countries.

**Curtail assistance to nations whose leaders evade term limits.** Section 7008 of the annual State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs appropriations bill (P.L. 116-260) blocks funding “to the government of any country whose duly elected head of government is deposed by military coup d’état or decree” until the secretary of state “can certify that a democratically elected government has taken office.” This provision should be amended to include violations of or changes to term limits that allow incumbent leaders to extend their time in office.

**Scrutinize the export of goods that could potentially be used to violate human rights.** When considering the export of technological and other products that could be used to violate human rights, governments should carefully study deals

with countries rated by any of Freedom House’s publications as Partly Free or Not Free.

**Increase transparency requirements for foreign state-owned propaganda outlets operating in democratic states.** Outlets like Russia’s RT and China’s CGTN and Xinhua spread government-approved narratives without clearly disclosing to readers and viewers that they are government financed. Measures to improve transparency could include labeling and reporting requirements that reveal outlets’ ownership structures and other economic ties to repressive state actors, as well as foreign-government spending on the placement of paid advertorials in domestic outlets.

**Strengthen laws that guard against foreign influence over government officials.** 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 by updating lobbying and foreign agent registration rules, and updating financial disclosure requirements for elected officials.

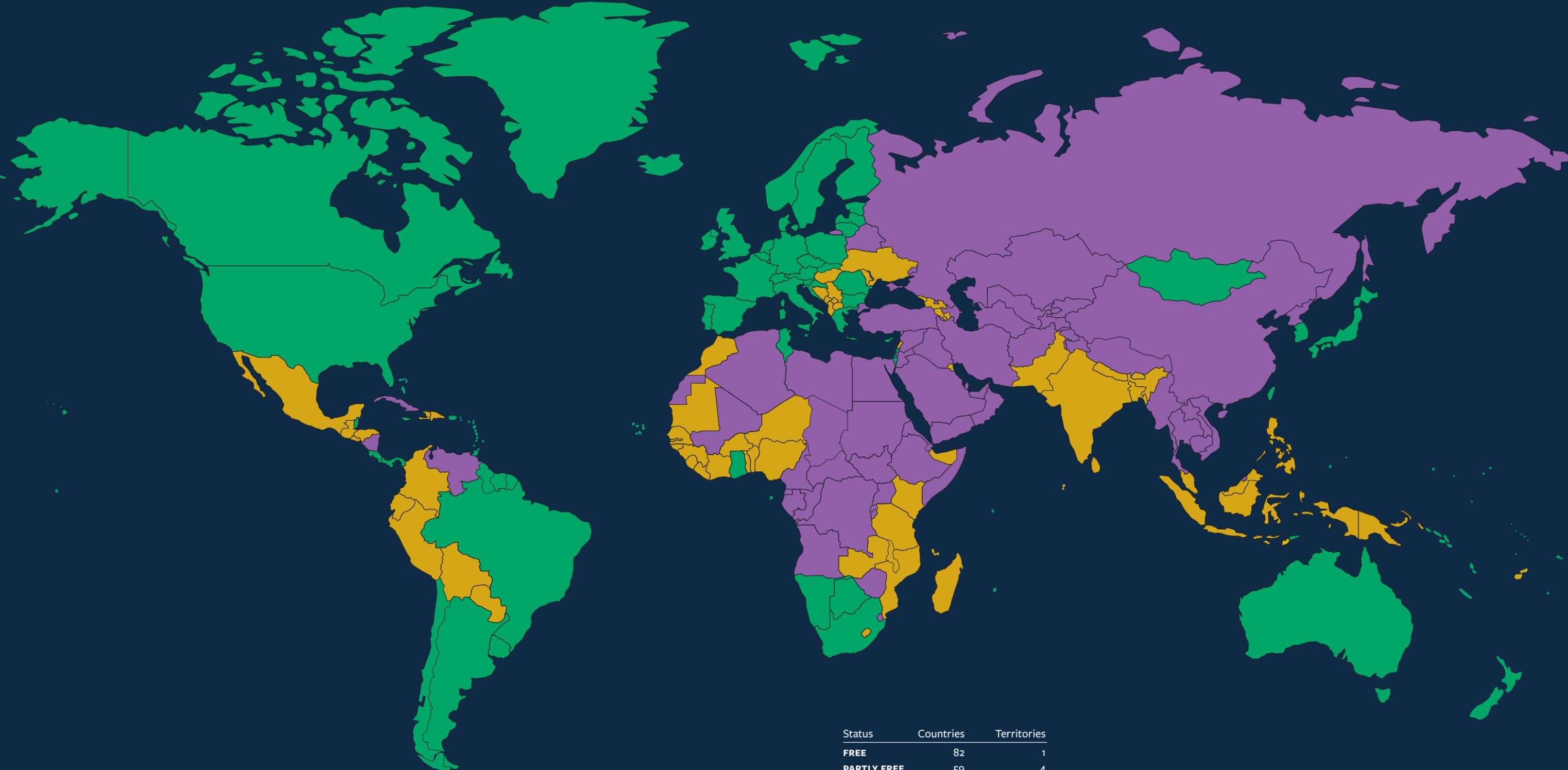
## STRENGTHENING US DEMOCRACY

**Reduce political polarization and extremism by establishing independent redistricting commissions.** Polling has shown that an overwhelming majority of Americans (more than 70 percent) support removing partisanship from the drawing of legislative boundaries. To address this problem, all 50 states should establish independent redistricting commissions, designing them carefully to ensure impartiality, inclusivity, and transparency.

**Bolster confidence in election integrity by instituting nonpartisan observation for elections nationwide.** Rules for nonpartisan election observers should be standardized and implemented nationwide. Nonpartisan observers should be employed to monitor the election process from start to finish, with an objective, data-driven approach.

**Protect and improve voting access for all.** States can facilitate the act of voting for all citizens by establishing same-day or universal automatic voter registration, allowing early voting and no-excuse absentee voting, extending voting hours and days, and placing special vote centers and traditional polling places in locations that meet the needs of the population. Election officials should be barred from changing polling hours and sites without adequate notice to voters. Special attention should be given to addressing racially discriminatory barriers to voting. States that have not already done so should restore voting rights for citizens with past felony convictions, without imposing financial or bureaucratic hurdles; due to racial disparities in the criminal justice system, such restrictions disproportionately disenfranchise Black Americans in particular. In addition, federal legislation should establish new criteria for determining which states and political subdivisions with a history of racially discriminatory voting rules must obtain federal clearance before implementing changes to electoral laws.

# FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2021



■ FREE
 ■ PARTLY FREE
 ■ NOT FREE

Status	Countries	Territories
<b>FREE</b>	82	1
<b>PARTLY FREE</b>	59	4
<b>NOT FREE</b>	54	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>195</b>	<b>15</b>

*Freedom in the World 2021* assessed 210 countries and territories around the globe.

“

Democracy is remarkably resilient, and has proven its ability to rebound from repeated blows.

”

## ***Freedom in the World Methodology***

*Freedom in the World 2021* evaluates the state of freedom in 195 countries and 15 territories during calendar year 2020. 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. The indicators are grouped into the categories of political rights (0–40) and civil liberties (0–60), whose totals are weighted equally to determine whether the country or territory 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/freedom-world/research-methodology>**.



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

freedomhouse.org  
facebook.com/FreedomHouseDC  
@FreedomHouse  
info@freedomhouse.org  
202.296.5101