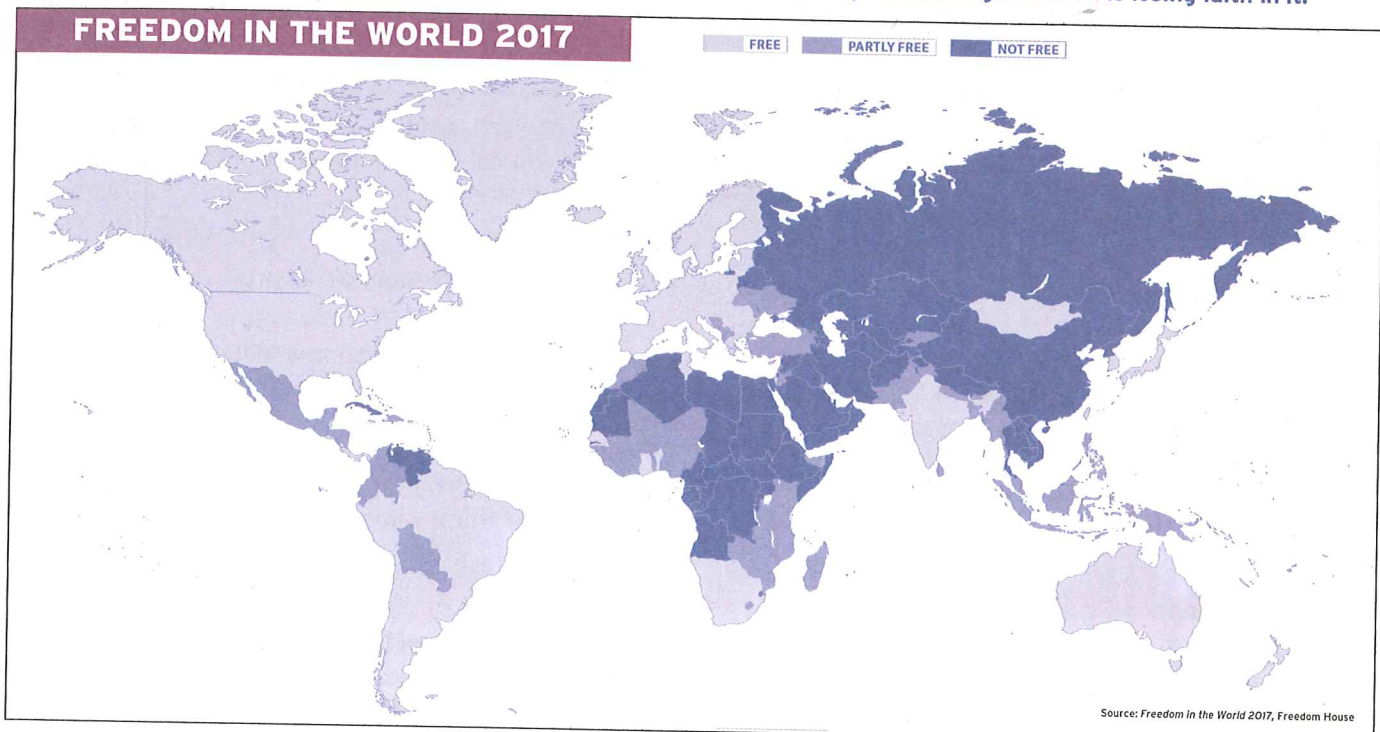


# IS DEMOCRACY IN TROUBLE?

According to many scholars, modern liberal democracy has advanced in waves. But liberal democracy has also had its setbacks. Some argue that it is in trouble in the world today, and that the young millennial generation is losing faith in it.



This map was prepared by Freedom House, an independent organization that monitors and advocates for democratic government around the globe. According to this map, how free is your country? Which areas of the world appear to be the most free? Which appear to be the least free? (Freedom House)

Since the American and French revolutions, there have been three major waves of liberal democracies. After each of the first two waves, authoritarian regimes like those of Mussolini and Hitler arose.

A third wave of democracy began in the world in the mid-1970s. It speeded up when the Soviet Union and the nations it controlled in Eastern Europe collapsed. Liberal democracies were 25 percent of the world's countries in 1975 but surged to 45 percent in 2000.

Many believed liberal democracy was on a permanent upward trend. But that optimism is today in doubt. During the last ten years, democratic governments have often failed to effectively deal with the Great Recession, the changing global economy, and terrorism.

## The "Democratic Recession"

Political sociologist Larry Diamond has recently written about a "democratic recession." He states that 25 countries have experienced "democratic breakdowns" since 2000. A breakdown can be a military takeover of government. Or a breakdown can be a gradual disappearance of democratic rights and procedures, such as free elections and the rule of law.

Diamond warns that well-established western democracies, like Britain and the United States, are retreating from democracy. Others warn of the revival of

authoritarian leaders like Russia's Vladimir Putin.

Freedom House has rated countries "free," "partly free," and "not free" for more than 70 years. Its *Freedom in the World* report for 2016 identified 67 countries with net declines in democratic rights and civil liberties. Only 36 countries had made gains. This marked the 11th straight year that declines outnumbered gains in this category.

The big news in the Freedom House report was that "free" countries (i.e., liberal democracies) dominated the list of countries that had democratic setbacks. A quarter of these countries are in Europe. Countries like Hungary, Poland, and France saw the rise of authoritarian-minded populist parties and politicians.

In many liberal democracies, populist politicians have recently gained voters' support. Populists claim to speak for the real desires of the people. They often speak against establishment politicians. Populists also often voice nationalist views. They put their own country's interests above those of their allies, trading partners, and the world.

In Europe, populist political parties have gained strength. They typically object to Muslim immigration, Syrian refugees, and free-trade agreements. They also object to European Union (EU) rules that require the free flow of workers across national borders. Many believe

## KEY TERMS

### Liberal Democracy

Modern democracy is a form of government that is also called *western* or *liberal* democracy. Examples include the United Kingdom, Germany, Japan, and the United States. Here are some essential characteristics of liberal democracies:

- regular, free, fair, and competitive multiparty elections;
- equal political rights and civil liberties such as the right to vote and freedom of speech;
- rule of law (no one is above the law, including political leaders);
- government powers are limited by checks and balances;
- the court system and judges are independent from political influence;
- civilian control of the military;
- peaceful transfer of power from one set of leaders to another following an election.

### Authoritarian Regime

Authoritarian regimes are headed by a strongman (autocrat) or elite group, like a party or military officers. Examples include North Korea, Syria, Russia, and China. Here are some major characteristics of authoritarian regimes:

- elections, if held, are not regular, free, or fair;
- opposition parties, if they exist, are intimidated by the regime; political opponents are kept in line by arrests and imprisonment;
- weak checks and balances on regime power;
- regime restricts freedom of the press and suppresses protests;
- regime controls court system and judges;
- regime ignores rule of law by ruling by decree;
- regime abuses human rights;
- regime promotes nationalism, fear of foreigners, and traditional cultural values to remain popular;
- regime may resort to violence to remain in power.

that Britain's recent vote to leave the EU was heavily motivated by these sentiments. In the U.S., Donald Trump's "America First" presidential election campaign was based on similar populist and nationalist themes.

The populist surge in the established liberal democracies is also related to those who are economically disadvantaged. These people are often less-educated and low-skilled workers who have lost good-paying manufacturing jobs. These jobs often disappear when factories close due to foreign trade competition.

Studies have shown that economic insecurity is likely to lead some people to favor populist candidates with authoritarian beliefs. Some worry that politicians who dwell on people's fears of social and economic change threaten liberal democracy.

### Evidence Liberal Democracy Is Not in Trouble

Other researchers disagree that liberal democracy is in trouble. In 1990, Freedom House rated 38 developing and former communist countries as "free." In 2014, there were 60 of them. In the latest Freedom House report, no established western liberal democracies were trending down overall in freedom.

Professor of government and international relations Pippa Norris recently published a comprehensive study of "democratic backsliding." She discovered "no evidence" that political rights and civil liberties had declined in the established western liberal democracies from 1972 to 2016.

There are critics of Larry Diamond's "democratic recession" argument. They point out that two-thirds of the 25 countries he listed as suffering from democratic breakdowns were never really liberal democracies to begin with. For example, former Eastern European communist countries have taken another path to authoritarianism.

Some experts say that democracies are resilient and self-correcting. In May 2017, French voters rejected populist presidential candidate Marine Le Pen. She had been encouraged by the British vote to leave the European Union and by Donald Trump's presidential win.

### Have Millennials Lost Faith in Democracy?

In 2016, a new study by Roberto Foa and Yascha Mounk shook up the debate about the state of democracy in the world. Foa, a political scientist at the University of Melbourne (Australia), and Mounk, a lecturer in government at Harvard, based their conclusions mainly on the World Values Survey. Since 1981, this survey has used a questionnaire on the beliefs and values of people in nearly 100 countries.

The latest World Values Survey (2010–2014) provided data on questions concerning democracy. Based on the results, Foa and Mounk concluded that there was less support for democracy and more support for authoritarian ideas among those living in liberal democracies than in previous surveys.

When populist parties and candidates begin to gain power in established liberal democracies, Foa and Mounk warn that is reason for concern. One of their shocking findings was that the young millennial generation was

*A new study shook up the debate about the state of democracy in the world.*

more negative about democracy than older generations across the globe, and even more so in the U.S.

Who are the millennials? People born between the years 1980 and 1999 (ages 18 to 37) are commonly defined as millennials.

Foa and Mounk focused on data from the results of several questions on democracy that the World Values Survey asked Americans. The oldest U.S. generation born before World War II was asked if they thought it was absolutely important “to live in a country that is governed democratically.” Seventy-two percent agreed. The response among U.S. millennials, however, was only about 30 percent. Foa and Mounk published a graph, showing a sharp decline for the importance of democracy by decade of birth (1930-1980) in six liberal democracies.

The World Values Survey has asked for a number of years if democracy is a bad or very bad “way of governing this country.” In 1995, only 16 percent of Americans in their late teens or early twenties agreed. In 2011, 24 percent of the same age group (millennials this time) agreed. This figure was lower among millennials in Europe where about 13 percent agreed.

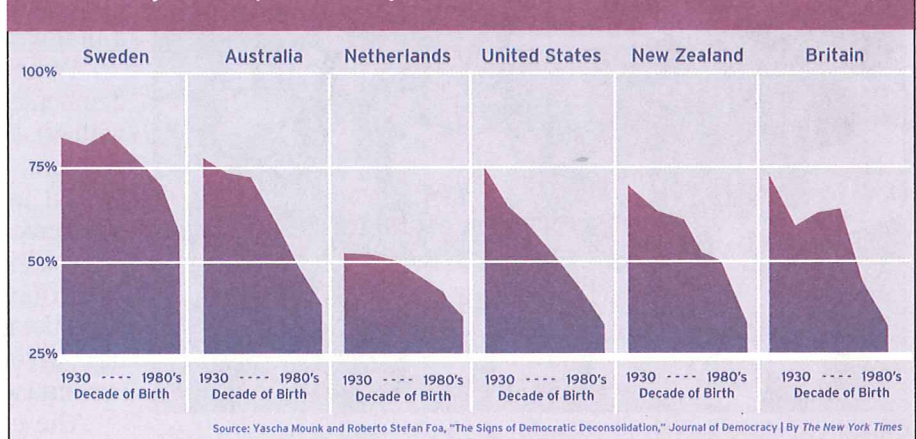
When the World Values Survey questioned whether it is an essential characteristic of a democracy that “civil rights protect people’s liberty,” 41 percent of older Americans agreed while only 32 percent of U.S. millennials did. In Europe, 39 percent of millennials agreed.

The World Values Survey asked how essential it is in a democracy for people “to choose their leaders in free elections.” Of American baby boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, 14 percent agreed it was *not* essential contrasted with an astounding 26 percent of U.S. millennials. In Europe, the results were 9 percent of the baby boomers and 13 percent of the millennials.

Most disturbing to Foa and Mounk were results that showed American millennials having significant acceptance of authoritarian beliefs. The survey asked people if they thought it was legitimate in a democracy if “the army takes over when government is incompetent.” Among Americans, 43 percent of those in older generations but only 19 percent of millennials rejected an army takeover. In Europe, 53 percent of people in older generations and 36 percent of millennials rejected military rule.

Foa and Mounk concluded that throughout the world, only a minority of young citizens believe it is essential to live in a democracy. More worrisome, say the two researchers, is that American millennials are much less enthusiastic about democracy and more open to authoritarian ideas than older Americans or even millennials in Europe.

Percentage of People Who Say It Is “Essential” to Live in a Democracy



Foa and Mounk worry that the old idea that well-established liberal democracies like the U.S. are set forever may no longer be true. “American citizens” say Foa and Mounk, “are not just dissatisfied with the performance of particular governments; they are critical of liberal democracy itself.”

### Millennials and Democracy: The Debate Is On

The Foa and Mounk study prompted alarm about millennials’ apparent loss of faith in democracy. But scholars quickly noted that Foa and Mounk based their findings mainly on one source, the World Values Survey.

Researchers soon looked at other surveys and conducted their own studies. Several reported they could find little evidence for a significant fall in the support of democracy in established liberal democracies. Significant backsliding in *non-western* “free” and “partly free” countries such as Mali, Hungary, Poland, and Turkey has taken place. But no such backsliding has happened in established *western* liberal democracies.

The Lowy Institute Poll in Australia reported that in 2012 only 39 percent of 18–29 year-olds expressed a preference for democracy. But the trend climbed sharply to 54 percent in 2016. This may indicate that local political developments may influence how young people perceive democracy.

Erik Voeten, a professor of world affairs at Georgetown University in Washington, D. C., analyzed studies of American confidence in democratic institutions. He found that the older generations were the most upset about how Congress, the president, and the national government were actually working. He concluded that while millennials are “somewhat more skeptical of democracy” than in the past, the older generations today are the most skeptical.

European political scientists Amy Alexander and Christian Wetzel blame the rise of populist parties and candidates in Europe and the U.S. mainly on older people. These people hold traditional moral values and are upset with the liberal cultural shift toward such things as same-sex marriage. Alexander and Wetzel say that it is this older group that is most responsible for declines in the support of democracy.



Students at McGill University in Canada gathered in 2011 as part of a “vote mob” to encourage young people to vote in the next election.

According to recent polling by the Pew Research Center, American millennials tend to be in worse economic shape than their parents and grandparents. But they are also more optimistic, more tolerant, more politically liberal, less in favor of smaller government, and less likely to vote.

Poor voter turnout could be millennials’ “vote against democracy.” But political scientists have long blamed this on the “life cycle effect”: Young adults are typically politically apathetic but become more engaged and vote more often as they grow older.

Others point to the recent active involvement of young people in political movements, elections, and public protests in Europe, the U.S., and even in

authoritarian Russia. Social media has become a major political organizing tool for them.

When asked why they seem to be down on democracy, millennials point to their frustration with establishment politics and dysfunctional government. It’s the political gridlock, domination of special interests, and money in politics — not democracy itself — that bothers millennials.

Foa and Mounk have stuck by their findings and conclusions. They recommend waiting for more data, soon coming from the next World Values Survey (2017-19). Their biggest concern now is complacency:

The comforting assumption that . . . countries would not vote for extreme candidates when they never have before, or indeed that core norms [standards] of liberal democracy wouldn’t come under attack. . . hasn’t worked out very well so far. Now is the time to stop being complacent.

### WRITING & DISCUSSION

1. What do you think is the most important difference between a liberal democracy and an authoritarian regime? Why?
2. Some argue that populist and nationalist political parties and politicians are a danger to liberal democracy. Do you agree or disagree? Why?
3. What is the strongest evidence that millennials *are* and *are not* a major cause of declines in the support of democracy? Which side do you agree with more? Why?

## ACTIVITY: Is Democracy in Trouble?

### Part I

Form into groups to each survey a sample of people born before 1980 and millennials born between 1980 and 1999. Use the following survey questions based on those from the World Values Survey discussed in the article. Each student should try to get at least five responses from each age group. (Note: This is not a scientific survey with random sampling.)

- A. What is your birth year?
- B. Survey Questions:

Q1: It is absolutely important to live in a country that is governed democratically. Agree? Disagree? Not Sure?

Q2: A democracy is a bad or very bad way to run this country. Agree? Disagree? Not Sure?

Q3: It is essential in a democracy that civil rights protect people’s liberty. Agree? Disagree? Not Sure?

Q4: It is *not* essential in a democracy for people to choose their leaders in free elections. Agree? Disagree? Not Sure?

Q5: It is OK in a democracy if the army takes over when government is incompetent. Agree? Disagree? Not Sure?

### Part II

1. Tally and calculate the percentages of the responses for the two age groups.
2. Compare your results with those stated in the article.
3. Taking your survey results and the evidence presented in the article into account, discuss whether you think democracy is in trouble. Report your conclusion and reasoning to the class.

T2T

For a supplemental activity by teacher-leader E’bow Morgan who teaches social studies at TEACH Charter High School in Los Angeles, California, download the digital version of this BRIA issue here: [www.crf-usa.org/bill-of-rights-in-action](http://www.crf-usa.org/bill-of-rights-in-action).

