



United States of America — Va-PoReg Country Report

Kailitz, Steffen, et al., 2026: Varieties of Political Regimes (Va-PoReg). Country Report United States of America, Dresden: Hannah Arendt Institute for Totalitarianism Studies.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/JYEL7U>

07/04/1776 Start Electoral Oligarchy: On 07/04/1776 independence from Great Britain was declared and on 09/03/1783 Great Britain recognized the independence (Marshall 2021).¹ Initially, most states allowed only white male adult property owners to vote, representing about 6% of the population. This period, therefore, cannot be considered fully democratic. The perception that the democratic regime started on 04/07/1776, as posited by MCM, is contentious, especially considering the minimal criteria for democracy. The introduction of male suffrage at the national level in 1856 was a significant step, but it occurred in the shadow of prevalent slavery. The passage of the 13th Amendment by Congress on 01/31/1865, and its ratification on 12/06/1865, abolishing slavery, was a pivotal moment in American history. However, the reality of social and political equality was far from being achieved. The 15th Amendment, ratified in 1870, granted suffrage to males regardless of skin color or ethnicity, including former slaves.² The constitutional amendment provided explicit protection for the voting rights of Black Americans in both the North and the South. However, more robust versions of the amendment, advocated by Radical Republicans and Black Americans, which aimed to prohibit states from imposing nativity, property, or literacy tests, and grant the federal government complete control over rights, were rejected due to concerns about their ratification (Davidson 1992). Therefore, Black Americans faced systemic barriers to voting, particularly in the Southern states, through mechanisms like poll taxes, literacy tests, and other discriminatory practices.³ As a result in 1906, only two percent of Alabama's black population were registered, whereas 83 percent of white Alabamians were registered. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), founded in 1910, took the lead role in legal actions against discriminatory procedures (Davidson 1992). Overall, in the period 1900-1920 between 18.4 and 15.8 percentage of the overall population participated in the elections (Vanhanen 2019). Therefore, we classify the regime in this period as an electoral oligarchy. The systemic character of discrimination of black people in the South resembles regulations of the Apartheid-regime in South Africa makes it a case of electoral oligarchical autocracy even bordering to a racist right-wing autocracy. Hence, in a strict sense in this period only the Northern States can be classified as an electoral oligarchy, the Southern States were electoral oligarchical autocracies. Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. Since 1900 the country's elections are considered as competitive by LIED. V-Dem's CEI scores ambiguous cleanliness outcomes. V-Dem's EF&FI indicates the overall conditions as already free and fair between 1900 and 1916. The following two years they decreased to somewhat free and fair outcomes. Moreover, LIED considers that political liberties were absent for this time, whereas V-Dem's PCLI already indicates full political liberties, except between 1917 and 1918 when it indicated that political liberties were somewhat achieved. According to the LDI the United States are classified with a what we call not really outcomes. The decisive reason for the classification is the exclusivity of suffrage. As per Polity5's classification, the executive's authority was on par with or below that of other branches, reflecting executive parity or subordination. For the relevant period, V-Dem's JCE is classified by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were comprehensive, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were also comprehensive.

11/02/1920 End Electoral Oligarchy/Start Electoral Democracy: On this date, with the first presidential elections allowing female suffrage, the USA transitioned from an electoral oligarchy to an electoral

democracy.⁴ This change followed the ratification of the 19th Amendment on 08/18/1920, which granted women the right to vote, a significant step towards gender equality in voting rights. Despite this progress, full voting rights for Black Americans were not effectively established until the Voting Rights Act of 1965, signed into law on 08/06/1965 (Yang/Gaines 2008).⁵ Throughout the 20th century, segregation and racial discrimination, particularly in the Southern states, continued to pose significant challenges to American democracy. The enforcement of Jim Crow laws institutionalized racial segregation, undermining democratic ideals.⁶ In Texas for example Black Americans were kept from party membership. Therefore, being white was necessary to take part in the Democratic primary. This was only overturned by the Supreme Court in *Smith v. Allwright* in 1944. In 1940 black voters in the South stood at only three percent of voting-age Black Americans. In 1957 the percentage had increased to 25 of voting-age blacks. Among whites, however, it was 60%. Besides poll tax, the most effective barrier to keep blacks from voting was literacy tests. In 1944 literacy tests were operative in all Southern States except from Arkansas and Texas (Davidson 1992).⁷ Even if it had been administered fairly, the system would have still marginalized many black individuals due to disparities in education. However, white registrars often exercised arbitrary judgment in administering the test, allowing illiterate whites to vote while excluding literate blacks.(Davidson 1992). Although the number of registered Black Americans had doubled between 1952 and 1964 (up to 43.3 percentage), in Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana and South Carolina the average registration was only at 22.5 percent of voting-age Black Americans. In Mississippi it stood only at 6.7 percentage (Davidson 1992). Robert A. Dahl notes that the United States of America was less inclusive than all other polyarchies, with the exception of Switzerland, despite the introduction of universal male and female suffrage. For in no other polyarchy was a group of comparable size excluded. "It would not be entirely unreasonable to define polyarchy as requiring a degree of inclusiveness greater than that met by the United States, in which case this country would have to be classified as near polyarchy" (Dahl 1971: 29). Therefore, the United States of America still do not fulfill the requirements to be classified as full democracy even though de jure universal male and female suffrage had been granted. Like in the previous period, in a strict sense the Northern States and the Southern states would have to be classified differently. The former as defective democratic and the latter as an electoral hybrid regime. However, it must also be noted that the repressive system of the Southern states was also supported by an agreement with the most important political class in the North not to interfere in the affairs of the Southern states (Dahl 1971: 93-94). Overall, the de facto restrictions on the black population were so severe until 1965 that Va-PoReg classifies the regime as an electoral democracy. However, constitutional succession was upheld, even during major political crisis like the Second-World-War-era or extraordinary events like presidential death, for example the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1945 who was succeeded by his Vice President Harry Truman, or the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, who was succeeded by his Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson. The presidential power alternated between the two major political parties, underscoring the competitive character of the national elections. In the thirties, the Democratic Party found major support in the southern states; from the thirties onward, the support base shifted to northeastern and midwestern regions, specifically in lower and working class communities, organized labor, Catholics and Jewish and Black Americans in urban areas.⁸ Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. LIED considers that political liberties were absent until 1964. Nevertheless, according to V-Dem's PCLI the country guaranteed political rights except in 1945 somewhat political liberties were achieved. During this timeframe, V-Dem's JCE is classified by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were comprehensive, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were also comprehensive. Relating to the election process, the scores remain on moderate cleanliness until 1939. For the entire time the elections held, were competitive per LIED. Between 1920 and 1939 the elections score ambiguous cleanliness (V-Dem CEI). From 1940 to 1965 somewhat cleanliness is scored. However, the overall election conditions maintained freedom and fairness during this period, following V-Dem's EF&FI. Nevertheless, the LDI confirms the state of a deeply defective electoral democracy.

08/06/1965 End Electoral Democracy/Start Liberal Democracy: On this date the Voting Rights Act of 1965, was signed into law.⁹ This act was designed to overcome legal barriers at state and local levels that prevented African Americans from exercising their right to vote as guaranteed under the 15th Amendment and therefore marks the transition from a defective to a liberal democracy.¹⁰ Following the 1972 Watergate scandal, Richard Nixon was the first president in U.S. history to resign from office on 08/09/1974.¹¹ His successor Gerald Ford then granted an unconditional pardon to Nixon on 09/08/1974, for any crimes he may have committed against the United States.¹² On 12/08/1987, Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev signed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, banning nuclear and conventional intermediate- and short-range missiles for the U.S. and USSR. The treaty was ratified on 06/01/1988.¹³ Entering the 21st century, the American democratic system faced new challenges. The 2000 presidential election raised concerns about election integrity and judicial involvement in electoral processes. These issues highlighted the complexities and vulnerabilities in the U.S. electoral system.¹⁴ The terrorist attacks on 09/11/2001 prompted the subsequent War on Terror and the expansion of domestic surveillance, through measures such as the PATRIOT Act.¹⁵ In 2008, Barack Obama became the first Black president of the U.S.¹⁶ The presidency of Donald Trump from 2017 to 2021 brought additional challenges to democratic norms in the U.S., including claims of foreign interference in the 2016 election and unprecedented challenges to the electoral process. On 01/06/2021, supporters of then-U.S. President Donald Trump stormed the United States Capitol in an attempt to prevent the certification of President-elect Joe Biden's victory. Despite their efforts, the attack did not succeed in overturning the election results. An investigation by a bipartisan House select committee determined that the incident was part of a larger plan by Trump to overturn the election.¹⁷ These events underscored vulnerabilities in the American democratic system, igniting debates about electoral integrity, media influence, and the role of political institutions. While there are strong safeguards for civil liberties and a robust system of checks and balances in the U.S., there is a growing concern with regards to political extremism and the erosion of democratic institutions.¹⁸ However, the presidential power in this regime period continued to alternate, underscoring the competitive character of the national elections.¹⁹ The 2024 American general election on 11/05/2024 resulted in a Republican trifecta, with Donald Trump defeating Kamala Harris for the presidency and the party securing control of both the Senate and the House of Representatives. The election followed a tumultuous cycle marked by the unprecedented withdrawal of an incumbent president, Joe Biden, and a high-profile assassination attempt on Trump. Key issues driving the vote included the state of the economy, border security/immigration, and deep divisions over abortion rights and the future of American democracy.²⁰ Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. As per FH's classification for this regime period, the country is considered free with a score ranging from 2 to 4, which we also interpret as free in our framework. However, both LIED and V-Dem's PCLI score a constant presence of political liberties since 1965. Since its classification as a democracy, the country has consistently scored high on electoral competitiveness (LIED) and election cleanliness (V-Dem's CEI). Elections were free and fair according to V-Dem's EF&FI from 1965 to 1971, with a slight decline in 1972-1973. From 1974 to 1999, and from 2002 to 2015, elections again scored well on freedom and fairness, with brief dips in 2000-2001 and 2016-2017. Since 2018, the indicators show that elections have remained free and fair. Based on Polity5's assessment, during this period, the executive was either equal to or subordinate to other institutions, demonstrating strong constraints on decision-making authority. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE and LCE are both interpreted by us as indicating comprehensive constraints on the executive.

01/20/2025 End Liberal Democracy/Start Electoral Democracy: On his first day in office, President Trump pardoned all individuals who had been involved in the storming of the Capitol on 01/06/2024 and were either awaiting trial or had already been convicted. Nearly 1,600 people were pardoned, including 170 individuals who had already been convicted for the use of deadly weapons.²¹ Furthermore, on the same day, he also signed 26 Executive Orders. These include executive Orders 14149 and 14151, both of which aim to dismantle key elements of liberal democratic governance. Executive Order 14149, titled "Restoring Freedom

of Speech and Ending Federal Censorship,” prohibits federal agencies from cooperating with social media platforms or other organizations to moderate or restrict lawful speech, effectively undermining government efforts to counter disinformation.²² Executive Order 14151, meanwhile, eliminates all Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) initiatives within federal institutions, removes related positions, and bans funding or references to DEIA programs in public institutions and cultural agencies.²³ President Donald Trump’s immigration policies have been characterized by aggressive enforcement measures and a significant expansion of executive authority. Notably, on 01/20/2025, he signed Executive Order 14159, titled “Protecting The American People Against Invasion”, which authorized the expanded use of expedited removal procedures, effectively allowing for the deportation of individuals without a court hearing. The order also mandated the denial of federal funds to sanctuary jurisdictions and imposed civil and criminal penalties on immigrants who fail to register their status.²⁴ These strict immigration measures sparked widespread unrest, particularly in Los Angeles, where protests erupted in response to mass deportations and aggressive enforcement raids. In reaction to the demonstrations, the Trump administration deployed the California National Guard alongside federal law enforcement personnel to quell the unrest, even though the state government opposed such a federalized intervention.²⁵ Critics argue that this militarized response to civilian protests demonstrates an erosion of democratic norms, blurring the line between civil law enforcement and military action, and raising concerns about the centralization of executive power at the expense of local authority. Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the findings of LIED. According to FH’s classification for this regime period, the country is considered free, with a score of 4, which we also interpret as free within our framework. However, V-Dem’s EEFI and CEI are both interpreted by us as indicators that a climate of high political coercion and sustained delegitimization of the electoral process has been institutionalized since the transfer of power. V-Dem’s JCE and LCE are both interpreted as robust.

Electoral Democracy as of 07/01/2025 continued.

Additional sources (Lindner/Schultze 2005, Rodgers/Harrington 1985, Woll/Binstock 1984)

Notes

¹ https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/United_States_of_America_1992?lang=en

² [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_United_States_\(1865%E2%80%931917\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_United_States_(1865%E2%80%931917))

³ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_United_States_\(1865%E2%80%931917\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_United_States_(1865%E2%80%931917))

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1920_United_States_presidential_election

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal_suffrage#cite_note-centralasiainstitute.org-37

⁶ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_United_States_\(1865%E2%80%931917\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_United_States_(1865%E2%80%931917))

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Smith_v._Allwright

⁸ <http://www.chisols.org/narratives.html> , see narratives for version 5.0, United States of America_R: 1, United States of America_V: 1,

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal_suffrage#cite_note-centralasiainstitute.org-37

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics_of_the_United_States

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Nixon%27s_resignation_speech

¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pardon_of_Richard_Nixon

¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intermediate-Range_Nuclear_Forces_Treaty

¹⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics_of_the_United_States

¹⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/September_11_attacks

¹⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Presidency_of_Barack_Obama

¹⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/January_6_United_States_Capitol_attack

¹⁸ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/united-states/freedom-world/2024>

¹⁹ <http://www.chisols.org/narratives.html> , see narratives for version 5.0, United States of America_R: 1, United States of America_V: 1

²⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2024_United_States_elections

²¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pardon_of_January_6_United_States_Capitol_attack_defendants

²² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Executive_Order_14149

²³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Executive_Order_14151

²⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Executive_Order_14159

²⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2025_deployment_of_federal_forces_in_the_United_States

References

Dahl, Robert A. (1971): *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Davidson, Chandler (1992): The Voting Rights Act: A Brief History, in: Grofman, Bernard & Davidson, Chandler (Hrsg.), *Controversies in Minority Voting: The Voting Rights Act in Perspective*. Washington: The Brookings Institution, 7-34.

Lindner, Ralf/Schultze, Rainer-Olaf (2005): United States of America, in: Nohlen, Dieter (Hrsg.), *Elections in the Americas: A Data Handbook*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 647–730.

Marshall, Monty G. (2021): *Polity5 Regime Narratives: United States*. Center for Systemic Peace.

Rodgers, Harrell R./Harrington, Michael (1985): *Unfinished Democracy: The American Political System*. 2nd. Glenview: Scott Foresman.

Vanhanen, Tatu (2019): *Measures of Democracy 1810-2018 Dataset*. Finnish Social Science Data Archive.

Woll, Peter/Binstock, Robert H. (1984): *America's Political System*. 4th. New York: Random House.

Yang, Elizabeth M./Gaines, Kristi (2008): Ensuring Access to the Ballot Box: Voting Rights in the United States, in: *Social Education* 72, 223-229.