

# United States: The state of **US** **democracy**

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## Why the US matters now

Among the world's democratic countries, the United States stands out as one of the oldest, largest, and wealthiest modern democracies. It has built and shaped a largely liberal world order, and among the nuclear superpowers, it is the only democracy. Its role in the World Wars, the Cold War, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), along with its economic, diplomatic, and sociocultural foreign policy have made it the most powerful and influential state in modern history by far. Due to the US's global influence, the stakes are extraordinarily high when it comes to who wields power across the branches of the US government. Given the role the United States plays in guaranteeing the security of many other democracies, it is not only the future of democracy in the United States that is at stake, but the future of democracy around the world. The world's ability to address large-scale challenges such as climate change, global poverty, and risks from Artificial Intelligence (AI) strongly depends on the stances and actions of the United States as well.

## Need to know

- The US has been a far more democratic and liberal superpower than either Russia or China; as a principal architect of the modern liberal world order, it remains uniquely placed in terms of its global leadership. The US holds unparalleled agenda-setting power and coalition-forming leverage in global as well as regional governance. Any shifts in the US's domestic democracy and foreign policy reverberate across the international order.
- After having achieved a Polity rating of 'full democracy' for 40 years, the United States has experienced democratic backsliding that began in 2016. The descent has accelerated at an extraordinary pace since President Trump took office for the second time in 2025. US democracy is now under severe threat,

with POLITY rating it as an ‘anocracy’, a system that blends elements of both democracy and autocracy.

- The United States is highly tractable: A large and powerful civil society, though narrowed, remains very active. Numerous research organisations measure the effectiveness of pro-democracy initiatives.
- There are highly cost-effective tactics – and underfunded civil society organisations implementing them – that both US and foreign donors can support.
- A particularly promising pro-democracy tactic to support at this time is voter mobilisation through ‘Get out the vote’-style (GOTV) campaigns that reach previously unregistered voters. This tactic encourages the participation of marginalised, underrepresented voters, which allows the electorate to hold authoritarian actors accountable in the crucial 2026 House and Senate elections. Non-authoritarian actors have an important political home in both major parties and as independents, such that the tactic carries no commitment to political partisanship.
- Power for Democracies is actively engaging with civil society organisations (CSOs) to identify the most cost-effective initiatives. We are currently recommending Freedom2Vote, a non-profit organisation that can receive funds from both US and foreign donors. Freedom2Vote implements an innovative voter mobilisation tactic (see our Evaluation report). Its theory of change is unusually tractable, and its tactic’s effects have been measured in dozens of randomised controlled trials (RCTs). The effects are large enough to enable voter mobilisation CSOs to change the outcomes of national elections.

## Democracy snapshot

The US currently faces the greatest threat to democracy in its recent history. The months leading up to the midterm legislative elections

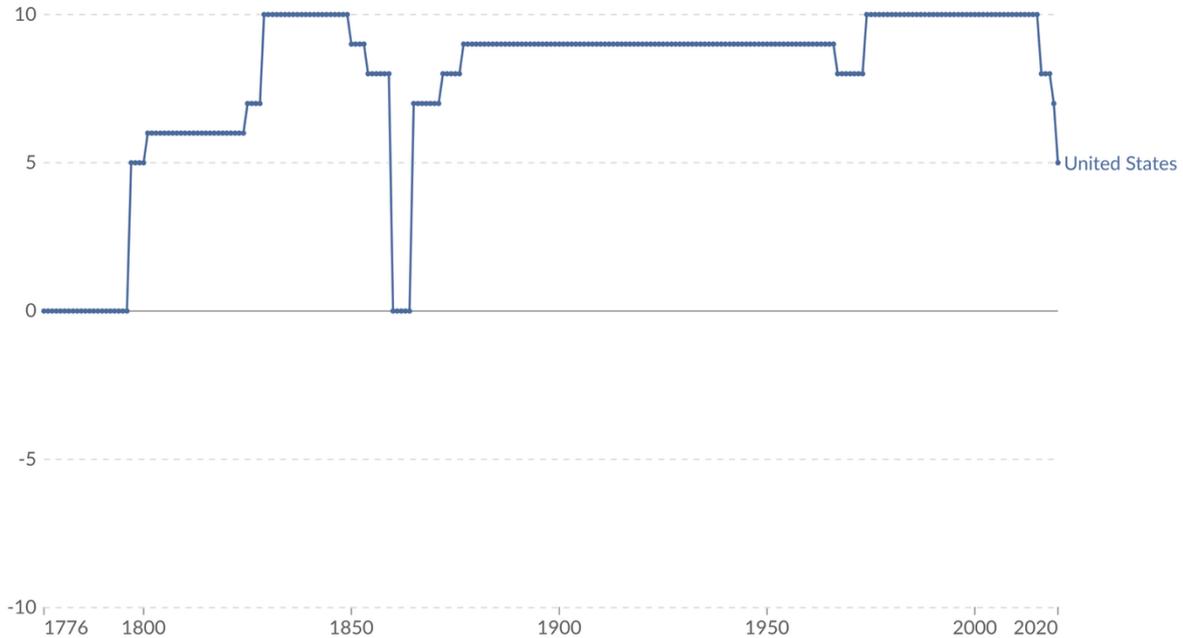
scheduled for November 2026, will be crucial in determining whether the US will see a return to liberal-democratic norms or whether authoritarian rule will be entrenched.

## **Recent democracy scores**

Polity, a source of record on democratic quality widely used by scholars, ranked the US as a full democracy from 1974 to 2015, extending it a score of +10. (The Polity Democracy Index ranges from -10 to +10, with a negative 10 representing full autocracy and positive 10 marking full democracy.) According to Polity's standards, which include competitive political participation and open, multi-party elections to select a chief executive who faces comprehensive institutional constraints, the US recently enjoyed full democracy for an extended period of almost 40 years<sup>i</sup> (see the graph below). Notably, Polity awarded the US relatively high scores during the presidencies of George W. Bush (2001–2009) and Barack Obama (2009–2017). In 2016, after Donald Trump's election in the month of November, the country was ranked +8; in 2020, the last year of Trump's first term, it scored below the democracy threshold at +5. In 2021, it returned to 'democracy' (+8) during Joe Biden's presidency.<sup>ii</sup>

## Democracy index

Data by Polity 5<sup>1</sup>. Expert estimates of the extent to which open, multi-party, and competitive elections choose a chief executive who faces comprehensive institutional constraints, and political participation is competitive. The index ranges from -10 to 10 (fully democratic).



Data source: Polity 5 (2020); Population based on various sources (2023)

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1. Polity The Polity project publishes data on democracy based on evaluations of its own researchers. The project is managed by the Center for Systemic Peace. Learn more: [Democracy data: how do researchers measure democracy?](#)

The beginning of democratic backsliding was registered by the other democracy and autocracy dataset of note, the Varieties for Democracy (V-Dem)’s Liberal Democracy Index (LDI). Using a scale from 0 to 1, the V-Dem LDI for the United States fell from 0.85 in 2015 to 0.74 in 2017, when Trump’s first administration (2017–2021) took office. By 2020, the LDI reached a low of 0.72.<sup>iii</sup>

Polity ranks the US at 0 in October 2025: no longer considered a democracy and lying at the cusp of autocracy.<sup>iv</sup> Beginning on 1 July 2024, Polity described the US as experiencing a regime transition away from democracy due to, among other factors, the Supreme Court ruling granting the US President broad legal immunity.<sup>v</sup>

While no V-Dem data is available yet for the country under Trump's second administration in 2025, V-Dem director Staffan Lindberg remarked: 'If it continues like this, the United States will not score as a democracy when we release [next year's] data.'<sup>vi</sup>

The US's rapid trajectory towards autocracy since the beginning of Trump's second term is being charted by many legal scholars, political scientists, and political commentators. Steven Levitsky, an expert on democratic backsliding at Harvard, notes that the first two months of 2025 'have been much more aggressively authoritarian than almost any other comparable case I know of democratic backsliding.' He has since added: 'we are no longer living in a democratic regime.'<sup>vii</sup>

### **Authoritarian playbook**

Current developments in the United States follow the authoritarian playbook documented by political science in many autocratising countries around the world.<sup>viii</sup> This includes using legal tools to capture or neutralise referees (courts, the civil service, law enforcement, and the military), restricting independent media and civil society, manipulating administrative and electoral rules, and channelling state resources and emergency powers toward regime entrenchment.

As of October 2025, the Trump administration has fired tens of thousands of federal employees and is planning to fire thousands more, which may be partly illegal. The government has sought military deployments in cities across the United States while threatening to invoke the Insurrection Act, which empowers the president to deploy the military domestically and federalise the National Guard. The administration, including the Pentagon, has restricted press access, with the notable example of AP, on which the courts intervened. It politicised the Justice Department and redirected federal law enforcement towards partisan ends; it mounted mass-deportation

operations violating the right to due process and expanded the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) with a budget surpassing many of the world's militaries, potentially turning it into a paramilitary force, dismantled the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) while centralising control via a newly-created Department of Government Efficiency Agency.

These are just a few examples of the authoritarian moves the US has been facing. Every new move strains its democratic institutions and culture.

## **Geopolitical importance**

Since 1945, the United States has been a principal architect and anchor of the rules-based, liberal world order, co-founding the United Nations (where it retains a permanent Security Council seat), the Bretton Woods system (International Monetary Fund and World Bank), and later shaping the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT)/World Trade Organization (WTO) trade regime.

Beyond institution building, US leadership in core alliances and steering forums including NATO, G7, and G20 gives the country exceptional agenda-setting power, resource mobilisation capacity, and coalition-forming leverage in both global and regional governance. In practice, the US's credibility and engagement is pivotal for these institutions' effectiveness, such that shifts in its domestic democracy and foreign policy reverberate across the international order.

Based on the widely accepted measures of power detailed below, the US is considered the first or second most powerful country in the world, rivalled only by China. It surpasses all democratic countries by a large margin.

## **Nuclear and conventional military power**

Nine countries possess nuclear warheads; with 3,700, the United States ranks second after Russia (4,309), followed by China (600). From 1945 to 2006, a new nuclear armed state emerged on average every five years, with some states later giving up their nuclear arms again.<sup>ix</sup>

If the US were to withdraw its security cooperation and guarantees to allied states – a distinct possibility under the Trump administration – more states may want to acquire nuclear weapons.<sup>x</sup>

Military spending by the United States amounts to approximately \$916 billion per year (2023), or 37 per cent of the world's military expenditures. China, which ranks second, has military expenditures estimated at \$296 billion per year.<sup>xi</sup>

The US's superior military power and aid has backstopped the security of many democracies around the world, including NATO members as well as non-members such as Japan and South Korea.

## **National capability and GDP**

The latest version of the Composite Indicator of National Capability (CINC) ranks the United States second in the world, just behind China.<sup>xii</sup> CINC compiles a measure of state power including six variables: military expenditure, military personnel, energy consumption, iron and steel production, urban population, and total population. The latest dataset (v6) is from 2016.

The US had a gross domestic product (GDP) of \$28.75 trillion in 2024, followed by China at \$18.7 trillion and Germany at \$4.7 trillion.<sup>xiii</sup> In protracted conflict scenarios, total GDP strongly determines the resources a country is able to mobilise. It is also an indicator of a country's commercial and sociocultural influence around the world.

## **Artificial intelligence**

Current trends indicate that the US will be the global leader when it comes to the development of powerful, potentially game-changing artificial intelligence (AI) technologies. It boasts an ecosystem of leading AI companies, large tech corporations to assist them, massive private sector and public investment, and access to an international talent pool.

These factors are driving AI development in the US at an unmatched pace. While China is the only country capable of mounting a significant challenge, it currently lags behind. The US's leadership in AI may soon give the country additional economic and military power, which may further solidify – and perhaps greatly expand – its global influence.<sup>xiv</sup>

## **Global governance and development funding**

Before the second Trump administration cut foreign aid and disbanded the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in 2025, the US spent almost \$3 billion per year supporting democracy and good governance worldwide, including in some of the countries Power for Democracies has designated as high priority.<sup>xv</sup>

There is some evidence that democracy assistance from the US in past decades has been associated with improved democracy abroad.<sup>xvi</sup> Yet as these massive budget cuts under the Trump administration illustrate, 'consensus policies' do not guarantee their permanence. Even a small chance of successfully maintaining such funding, or influencing a small percentage of such funding, may have important expected impacts on democracy in other countries.<sup>xvii</sup>

Moreover, harmful policies can be even more damaging to democracy abroad than cutting or denying pro-democracy funding. In the past, US foreign policy has supported autocratic governments and undermined

democracies, including through violent means, in Chile, Guatemala, Indonesia, and elsewhere.<sup>xviii</sup> Reducing the likelihood that US foreign policy undermines democracies, supports autocrats, or supports and commits mass atrocities is crucial, and depends upon who wields power across the branches of the US government. Many other countries have supported democracy or autocracy abroad, but the US has been a singularly important player since World War II.

In the decade from 2010 to 2020, the US spent about \$55 billion per year on foreign aid.<sup>xix</sup> This amount increased to more than \$70 billion in 2023, mostly due to US military aid to Ukraine. Disaster relief and other humanitarian aid amounted to \$15.6 billion, over \$10 billion was spent on HIV/AIDS, and over \$1 billion on pandemic influenza and other global public health issues.<sup>xx</sup> In 2025, the US President's Emergency Fund for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), an anti-HIV/AIDS programme that has saved more than 25 million lives, faced a significant funding freeze, resulting in serious disruptions in critical life-saving HIV treatment and prevention programmes, the dismissal of staff, and the suspension of services for orphans and vulnerable children.<sup>xxi</sup>

## Threats to democracy

The ongoing threats to democracy in the US are numerous and serious. A non-exhaustive list includes (1) threats to free and fair elections, (2) the militarisation of cities and a potential paramilitary build-up (including as a threat to electoral integrity), (3) threats to the rule of law and the separation of powers, corruption, and foreign influence, and (4) threats to the independence of the media, universities, and law firms.

**(1) Threats to free and fair elections:** Among other things (see below), the Trump administration is pressuring states to redraw congressional districts for the administration's political benefit (gerrymandering), outside of the usual, census-based ten-year cycle. More broadly, the

administration is systematically attempting to overstep the executive branch's legal authority regarding elections.<sup>xxii</sup>

**(2) Militarisation of cities and domestic police build-up:** The administration has labelled protesters 'the enemy within' and the US National Guard has been ordered to numerous Democrat-led cities viewed as opposition strongholds.<sup>xxiii</sup> This erodes a crucial norm against using the military for domestic purposes, except in the most extreme of circumstances. While this is being litigated in the courts, the administration has threatened to invoke the Insurrection Act to justify domestic troop deployment.<sup>xxiv</sup> Furthermore, the administration is expanding Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)<sup>xxv</sup> with a budget surpassing many of the world's militaries. Given these threats, the upcoming congressional and presidential elections (2026 and 2028) may take place under coercive conditions.<sup>xxvi</sup>

**(3) Threats to the rule of law and the separation of powers, corruption, and foreign influence:** President Trump has defied various court orders. He has enriched himself and his family while in office through multiple business schemes, including with cryptocurrency, and entangling private interest with official business in foreign countries such as the United Arab Emirates.<sup>xxvii</sup> His administration has attempted to use spending power that is allocated to Congress, in a move known as the pocket rescission, to prevent already allocated funds from being distributed, including as foreign aid.<sup>xxviii</sup> Previously, the non-partisan Government Accountability Office (GAO) declared this illegal under the Impoundment Control Act (ICA). At the same time, the 2024 Supreme Court ruling that the US president is presumptively immune for all acts that can be construed as official has further expanded executive power.

**(4) Threats to the independence of the media, universities, and law firms:** The Trump administration has used the power of the federal government to attempt to extract concessions from universities and law

firms. While some of these attempts have been successful, others have been rejected, yet the requests and threats are ongoing. The administration has likewise sued numerous media outlets, with some deciding to settle while other cases were rejected in court.

## **Threats to free and fair elections**

The upcoming congressional mid-term elections in November 2026 and subsequent presidential election in 2028 will play a pivotal role in determining the future of democracy in the US and around the world, given the country's global influence.

The experience of the two administrations under President Trump to date reveals a model whereby critical steps are taken to undermine national elections.<sup>xxix</sup> The spread denialism about the 2020 presidential election result and efforts to overturn it on 2 January 2021, when the president pressured the state of Georgia's Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger 'to find 11,780 votes' and suggested refusal to act could be a criminal offence.<sup>xxx</sup>

On 6 January 2021, a mob attacked the US Capitol building in Washington to prevent the certification of the 2020 election. Numerous individuals were convicted for participating in this insurrection. Upon his return to office in 2025, Trump granted pardons or commutations to all of those federally convicted of crimes related to this event, thereby incentivising<sup>xxxi</sup> future insurrectionist action on his behalf.

Democracy experts have warned that the current administration may pressure states to pass 'show your papers' requirements. While not in principle unreasonable, this would in effect disenfranchise millions of voters, as the Brennan Center has found that at least 21 million citizens do not currently have the relevant documentation readily available.<sup>xxxii</sup> Likewise, the president has made public claims that his administration

may pressure states to ban mail-in ballots and potentially restrict voting machines.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Furthermore, the administration has targeted law firms that have historically supported voting rights.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

## **Countering democratic decline**

Despite the size, wealth, and recent political evolution of the United States, US democracy is highly tractable. The country boasts a large and experienced civil society sector, which greatly increases the country's opportunity for change.

### **Effectiveness metrics**

The US civil society sector contains many research organisations, and research teams within organisations, that measure the effectiveness of pro-democracy tactics, especially in the electoral domain. This strongly improves the US's tractability relative to other countries.

While only a minority of civil society organisations in the US democracy space are data-driven and effectiveness-oriented, they are much more numerous in both relative and absolute terms than in other countries. Research-focused organisations compile and conduct rigorous studies on which tactics work, as well as those which do not or which are actively harmful, along with the tactics' effect sizes.

Those new to the space are often surprised by the extent to which the best tools of social science – especially randomised controlled trials (RCTs), the gold standard of study designs – have been successfully applied for two decades. Thus, top civil society recommendations for the US are often backed by orders of magnitude more combined researcher-hours than the recommendations for other countries.

## Close elections increase tractability

US civil society organisations working to ensure free and fair elections are much more likely to have a decisive effect on the country's future when national elections between authoritarians and their opponents are expected to be close. The same applies to organisations working to protect the freedom and independence of journalists, who scrutinise the authoritarian moves being employed to undermine electoral integrity and the rule of law more broadly. The chance of such civil society organisations changing national outcomes for the US, as opposed to having smaller scale impacts that somewhat improve the situation but don't significantly alter the country's democracy/autocracy score, is much greater when upcoming elections are likely to be decided by narrow margins.

The same can be said for US civil society organisations mobilising voters to counter authoritarianism in pivotal elections. The pathway to nationwide, game-changing impact is much clearer in close electoral scenarios than when electoral outcomes are more predetermined.

Indeed, US elections have recently been so close that the work of voter mobilisation initiatives has proven decisive on a national scale. For example, several US presidential elections were decided by razor-thin margins<sup>xxxv</sup>: In 2000, George W. Bush won against Al Gore by 537 votes in the state of Florida; in 2016, Trump beat Hillary Clinton by 77,744 votes in three swing states; and in 2020, Joe Biden beat Trump by 42,918 votes, also in three swing states. Trump's 2024 victory over Kamala Harris in those three states was somewhat less tightly contested (229,766 votes) but might well have been closer.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

These numbers show that donors enabling the work of even relatively small civil society organisations have changed the outcome of US

national elections, and – given the United States’ global influence – the course of the world.

For example, there are effectiveness-focused civil society organisations which likely prevented a Trump victory in 2020 with a budget of just \$20 million. Causing about 40,000 additional votes with this budget (by funding voter registration and turnout tactics, see below) entails a cost per vote of approximately \$500. Many studies confirm that strategic donors can cause an additional vote for a dollar amount ranging from the low hundreds to the low thousands.<sup>1</sup> Such effect sizes on a large country of 340 million, and on the entire world given the US’s crucial international role, are hard to come by in any cause area.<sup>2</sup> This presents excellent opportunities for the organisations that are working to protect US democracy as well as the donors backing their work.

The proliferation of civil society organisations along with the billions of dollars already involved in US democracy, however, might lead donors to inaccurately assume the space is not neglected. While it is true that the space is crowded, this does not mean that it is not neglected in the sense that matters: only a minority of civil society organisations in the United States are effectiveness-focused, and many of them have funding gaps that donors can fill. This is the sense of neglectedness that matters for social impact.

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<sup>1</sup> For strategic reasons, these civil society organisations prefer not to be named in places of high public exposure. Though fully compliant with US law, they could be targeted by authoritarian lawfare or PR campaigns, and their highly effective tactics may be copied by authoritarian strategists and organisations. More generally, there is a 'dual use' problem affecting public information sharing in this space: The results of randomised controlled trials on the cost-effectiveness of various tactics, for example, can be used by authoritarians, too.

<sup>2</sup> The Voter Participation Center, a US voter mobilisation organisation, estimates that non-partisan, informational postal mail (which has been the most consistently effective voter mobilisation tactic known for the last decade) cost \$277 in 2020 per net vote (\$347 adjusted for inflation in 2025). Vote America, another major voter empowerment group, estimates that in 2022, implementing this tactic cost \$218 per vote (\$238 in 2025). Additional details on this estimate rely on private experimental data that may be possible to share in greater detail with trusted donors. (The Voter Participation Center and Center for Voter Information, 'Social Pressure in Voter Outreach,' January 2025 <https://www.centerforvoterinformation.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Social-Pressure-Deck-January-2025.pdf> )

## Opportunities for change

In the medium term, one of the most important strategic goals for safeguarding US democracy is to ensure that the 2028 presidential election will be fair and that non-authoritarian actors will win back power and restore democracy.<sup>xxxvii</sup> If those actors lose again, there is a risk that autocracy could persist indefinitely.

With a view to 2028, it is urgent to support non-authoritarian actors in the ahead of the 2026 congressional elections. The opposition includes non-authoritarians across party lines: Democrats, Republicans, and independents, and if they gain control of the House and the Senate in the mid-term elections, Congress will have effective means to check the Trump administration's abuse of presidential power, and it will support the conventional practice of free and fair elections during the 2028 presidential election.

As the administration is currently proving, the US presidency can be wielded so powerfully that it can be used to dismantle the rule of law (when Congress and the Supreme Court fail to check it). This is being achieved by, among other things, pardoning insurrection and thereby incentivising further criminal action to facilitate a coup, decimating and corrupting the administrative state,<sup>xxxviii</sup> capturing the judiciary,<sup>xxxix</sup> and attacking and silencing civil society both domestically and internationally.

While curtailing the excessive power of the US presidency would be immensely important, it requires a constitutional amendment that is beyond reach for the time being. Indeed, if the 2028 presidential election is not sufficiently free and fair – or if it is free and fair but authoritarian power is still consolidated through the election – the result could lead to the end of democracy in the United States.

Modern democracies have been fragile;<sup>xi</sup> autocracies and dictatorships have often lasted decades (with an average of 21 years between 1800 and 2000),<sup>xii</sup> and the increasing use of AI-based surveillance and enforcement has the potential to make future resistance formidable.<sup>xiii</sup> China may already have entered the era of irreversible digital autocracy, and without effective counteraction, the US could follow suit.<sup>xiii</sup>

The theory of change supporting our recommendations, beginning with the macrostrategic goal and moving backward to effective actions that can be taken in the present, is as follows:

- Ensuring that the 2028 presidential election will be free and fair, and that non-authoritarian actors win back power, is key. These actors have an important political home in both major parties and as independents.<sup>xiv</sup> Opportunities targeted directly at 2028 will open in 2027.
- On the way there, the US will pass the milestone of the mid-term elections on 3 November 2026, when control of the House and the Senate is at stake. As the Trump administration's authoritarian moves have been met with support or non-resistance by majorities in both the House and the Senate, voters could express a preference against authoritarianism in the mid-term elections and help the opposition win back power. If they do so, the Trump administration's takeover attempt could be slowed significantly and, to an extent, blocked.<sup>xv</sup> This would help ensure that the 2028 presidential election will be sufficiently free and fair. Gaining a majority in the Senate in 2026 is more challenging than taking back the House, but it would allow the opposition to resist the Trump administration more effectively, especially due to the Senate's advice and consent role.<sup>xvi</sup>

What are the odds that the opposition can win the House and the Senate, respectively? Metaculus, a leading aggregator of individual

forecasts, suggests that the opposition has around a 4/5 chance of taking back the House – in line with the usual political pendulum swings in the midterms.<sup>xlvii</sup> By contrast, the opposition is given just a 1/3 chance of victory in the Senate.<sup>xlviii</sup>

While forecasting elections is challenging and a lot can happen before November 2026, these odds are plausible. In pessimistic scenarios, involving perhaps some (non-decisive) electoral meddling by the Trump administration and its authoritarian allies, the House might be very close; in optimistic scenarios, the non-authoritarian opposition could win the House in a landslide, and the Senate might be very close. In either type of scenario, every vote will count. This presents strategic donors with excellent opportunities for action:

- To help non-authoritarian actors win the House and the Senate in 2026, one can back efforts to ensure (1) that the 2026 elections will be sufficiently free and fair, and (2) that the opposition (spanning both major parties and independents) will achieve sufficient representation in the House and the Senate to check executive power.
- (1) provides the opportunity to support civil society organisations which are working to protect the integrity of the 2026 elections (e.g. via strategic litigation), the freedom of the media to scrutinise Trump and his allies, especially with regard to actions that threaten electoral integrity, and which organise collective resistance efforts to slow down Trump's takeover attempt overall. Since the United States has been autocratising at extraordinarily rapid speed, every decision by government officials or civil society actors matters in slowing the Trump administration down.
- (2) provides the opportunity to support civil society organisations which are working to mobilise marginalised and underrepresented voters for the 2026 elections. The respective voter registration and

turnout tactics can expand the electorate in ways that allow it to hold authoritarian actors accountable.

- While both strategies, (1) and (2), can be supported by American as well as international donors, Power for Democracies' first US recommendation is focusing on (2) for the reasons detailed below.

## Recommended actions

The cost-effectiveness of organisations implementing (1) is hard to study in a very rigorous manner; it is difficult, for instance, to systematically evaluate and quantify the effect of strategic litigation to ensure electoral integrity. By contrast, more than two decades of research have produced a wealth of quantitatively rigorous studies (RCTs) on what tactics work best to implement (2).

Our research into (1) is ongoing and being done in close collaboration with research partner organisations from the US civil society ecosystem. In terms of initiatives working on (2), Power for Democracies has identified an unusually effective voter registration and turnout organisation: Freedom2Vote, a non-profit which can receive donations from both domestic and foreign funders. Freedom2Vote uses innovative data sources to find millions of eligible, under-contacted citizens who may be interested in voting but are not registered.

## RCT-based cost-effectiveness estimates

The evidence base for this recommendation is unusually rigorous and robust. Freedom2Vote has demonstrated excellent results in increasing voter registration, which have been measured and replicated in dozens of RCTs across multiple election cycles. For example, Freedom2Vote's own and independently reviewed RCT for the 2024 presidential election found a +3.72 percentage point increase in voter registration and a +2.14 percentage point increase in turnout, translating into approximately 280,000 new registrations and about 160,000 additional votes

nationwide. This programme achieved an estimated cost of \$54 per net registration and \$94 per net additional vote, which is substantially lower than the costs typical of voter mobilisation programmes in high-salience elections (ranging between several hundred to several thousand dollars per vote). When accounting for multi-cycle retention of new voters, the long-term cost per vote likely falls below \$80. <sup>xlix</sup>

Freedom2Vote thus offers donors an unusually tractable theory of change – turning out voters in nationally pivotal and likely close elections – as well as highly measurable returns on investment.

With approximately \$19 million, the CSO projects to be able to register more than 350,000 new voters and turn out an estimated 250,000 additional voters in 2026. To date, the CSO has secured \$4–5 million from existing supporters, leaving an unmet need of approximately \$14–15 million (as of October 2025). This funding gap represents the difference between a very limited rollout and a fully scaled national programme reaching 12–14 crucial states.

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<sup>xlix</sup> The review is non-public, but interested donors can contact us for more information. There is a 'dual use' problem affecting public information sharing in the pro-democracy space: The results of randomised controlled trials on the cost-effectiveness of various tactics, for example, can be used by authoritarians, too. For some examples of publicly available evidence, see [https://sites.temple.edu/nickerson/files/2017/07/Nickerson\\_registration\\_JOP.2015.pdf](https://sites.temple.edu/nickerson/files/2017/07/Nickerson_registration_JOP.2015.pdf), <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/ps-political-science-and-politics/article/i-will-register-and-vote-if-you-teach-me-how-a-field-experiment-testing-voter-registration-in-college-classrooms/2752048B2D7F6E703553306C5EF8AB4D>, and [https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/alaunasafarpour/files/bryantetal2020\\_article\\_thepowerofthestatehowp-ostcards.pdf](https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/alaunasafarpour/files/bryantetal2020_article_thepowerofthestatehowp-ostcards.pdf).