

Methodology

To explore ways that the U.S. political system differs from most (or all) other democracies, we first had to compile a list of democratic countries to compare the United States against.

Defining democracies

To do this, we consulted democracy rankings developed by three leading research organizations: [Freedom House](#), the [Economist Intelligence Unit \(EIU\)](#) and the [Varieties of Democracy \(V-Dem\) Institute](#) at Sweden's University of Gothenburg.

Every organization didn't rate every country, and each one uses its own rating system. So we defined a democracy as follows:

1. When multiple organizations rated the country, it met *at least two* of three criteria:
 - Freedom House: Rated "free" or "partly free," but only if it also met the group's definition of an "electoral democracy"
 - EIU: Rated as a "full democracy" or "flawed democracy"
 - V-Dem: Rated as a "liberal democracy" or "electoral democracy"
2. When *only* Freedom House rated the country, it was rated "free" *and* met the organization's definition of an "electoral democracy." (No places that only EIU or V-Dem rated met either group's definition of any type of democracy.)

Using these criteria, 106 nations and other self-governing territories, including the U.S., qualified as democracies for our analysis.

Determining the uniqueness of U.S.-style democracy

For most of the topics we examined – how democracies choose their leaders and draw legislative districts, whether they permit "birthright citizenship," and so on – we were able to ascertain the answers from national constitutions and laws, using both official and unofficial translations. In some cases, we supplemented these texts with datasets compiled by other research organizations.

To determine whether countries routinely held elections on weekends or public holidays, we first looked for relevant specific statutory or constitutional provisions. When we couldn't find any, we compared the dates of each of the three most recent national elections.

One aspect of democracy – how hard it is to amend a nation's constitution – was a bit more involved.

Simply counting how many times a constitution has been amended and dividing that by the number of years it's been in effect was initially appealing, but for a few reasons proved problematic. Some countries, for instance, periodically revise their governing documents from top to bottom rather than adopting amendments individually. In other countries, a single amendment can make multiple changes to the constitution, making it unclear how to count them.

Instead, we decided to assess how difficult the constitutions make the amendment process, using a scoring rubric originally developed by the late political scientist Donald S. Lutz.

In an [influential 1994 paper](#), Lutz assigned points to various actions that might be part of a given amendment process, with more difficult actions earning more points. For example:

- If amendments can be approved by a simple majority in a unicameral legislature (that is, 50% plus one among those voting), that counts as 0.5 points.
- If amendments need approval by a three-fifths majority in both houses of a bicameral legislature, that counts as 1.25 points.
- If they must then be ratified by a simple majority in a popular referendum, that's an additional 1.5 points.

By summing the point values of all the steps, Lutz arrived at an overall difficulty score.

We employed Lutz's system, with a few modifications. First, since constitutions often spell out multiple ways they can be amended, we scored them all and used the *lowest* score (i.e., the least difficult pathway) in our rankings. It's worth noting, though, that the procedurally "easiest" pathway may or may not be the one most commonly followed in practice.

Second, some amending procedures had steps that Lutz hadn't covered. In those cases, we scored it the same as the most analogous action in his rubric. For example, Australia has a bicameral legislature, but in practice amendments can be initiated by an absolute majority (that is, a majority of the entire voting membership) of just one chamber. We gave that step in the process 0.65 points, the same score Lutz gave to initiation by an absolute majority of a unicameral legislature.