



United States Democracy Meter

2025 Scoring

2025 Total Score:

57/100



1. State Institutions **10/30 (down from 22/30 in 2024)**

a. Executive **3/10 (down from 9/10 in 2024)**

- i. Does the executive operate within the constraints imposed on it by Congress, the judiciary, and the constitutional order? **1/4 (down from 3/4 in 2024)**

The second Trump administration immediately embarked on a series of radical transformations of the federal government that were not authorized by Congress or by law. The administration slashed federal agencies without new appropriations or authorizations being passed by Congress, or reassigned the duties of agencies in such a way that staff was drastically reduced. More than [200,000 federal employees were terminated through a variety of maneuvers](#), nearly 9 percent of the total.¹ During a government shutdown in November, thousands of employees were laid off, [in violation of existing law](#).²

¹ "Federal Harms Tracker: Cost to Your Government," Our Public Service, <https://ourpublicservice.org/federal-harms-tracker/cost-to-your-government/>.

² "The Trump Administration Plans to Retaliate for a Government Shutdown by Firing Federal Employees, but Can It?," American Progress, September 30, 2025, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/the-trump-administration-plans-to-retaliate-for-a-government-shut-down-by-firing-federal-employees-but-can-it/>

In perhaps the most glaring example of lawlessness in its reorganization of the federal government, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) was completely closed and its staff fired, despite the agency being Congressionally authorized and fully funded.³ Lawsuits related to the closing are continuing; the administration has ignored weak attempts at Congressional oversight, mostly from the opposition.

The administration has also engaged in unlawful military activities, striking dozens of small boats in the Caribbean on the basis of highly dubious classified claims that cartels are using proceeds from drug smuggling there to wage war on allies in Central America.⁴ The government has strongly resisted Congressional oversight of the strikes, and has refused to publicly release its official justification for the strikes. Lawyers with experience in the executive branch from both parties have said these strikes are unlawful. After it was reported that the military had struck and killed two survivors of one of the strikes while they were stranded at sea, a group of former military lawyers said, if true, these actions would constitute “war crimes, murder, or both.”⁵ (In the first week of 2026, the administration conducted a military operation in Venezuela to seize the president of the country, Nicolas Maduro, and bring him to the United States for prosecution. The operation violated international law, and the administration neither consulted Congress nor sought its approval for the operation. Since these events occurred in 2026, they are not incorporated into the 2025 score.)⁶

ii. Does the executive obey the law, even when it limits executive actions? **2/4 (down from 4/4 in 2024)**

³ Emily M. McCabe, Congressional Research Service, "U.S. Agency for International Development: An Overview," Congress, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF10261>.

⁴ Hugo Lowell, "Trump Caribbean Boat Strikes Memo," *Guardian*, November 25, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/nov/25/trump-caribbean-boat-strikes-memo>.

⁵ "Former JAG Working Group No Quarter Statement," Just Security, <https://www.justsecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/former-jag-working-group-no-quarter-statement.pdf>.

⁶ "US Lawmakers React to Attack on Venezuela, Capture of Maduro," Al Jazeera, January 3, 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/1/3/us-lawmakers-react-to-attack-on-venezuela-capture-of-maduro>.

The second Trump administration has defied court orders and ignored legal rulings against it in multiple cases. In one of the most notable instances, [the government ignored a court order](#) to immediately pause the deportation of certain immigrants under a novel legal pretext that the court rejected.⁷ In a sign of how bad the situation is, federal judges have begun not extending the “presumption of regularity” to the government; in other words, they are no longer assuming that the government is behaving with procedural regularity and on the basis of good reasons.⁸

There were cases where federal rulings forced the government to back away from certain steps it had planned to take, including by releasing individuals from detention and by reassigning personnel who were found to have been unlawfully appointed.

- iii. Are civil servants and nonpolitical governmental personnel free of partisan political tests from the executive? **0/2 (down from 2/2 in 2024)**

The second Trump administration has imposed and acted upon clear partisan tests for governmental personnel, despite them being prohibited under federal law. The administration [issued new rules for federal workers](#) that required them to demonstrate political loyalty to the president and his agenda.⁹ Across various agencies, staff reported being [threatened by political appointees](#), who themselves had been subjected to overt loyalty tests before appointment.¹⁰ In one case, an employee of the FBI was [fired for](#)

⁷ Josh Gerstein and Kyle Cheney, "Trump, Boasberg, Deportation, Contempt," *Politico*, December 12, 2025, <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/12/12/trump-boasberg-deportation-contempt-00689798>.

⁸ Ryan Goodman et al., "Presumption of Regularity, Trump Administration Litigation," November 20, 2025, Just Security, <https://www.justsecurity.org/120547/presumption-regularity-trump-administration-litigation/>.

⁹ Donald F. Kettl, "Trump's Push for Executive Order Loyalty Risks Undermining Federal Workforce and Constitution," Govexec, June 2025, <https://www.govexec.com/workforce/2025/06/trumps-push-executive-order-loyalty-risks-undermining-federal-workforce-and-constitution/405905/>.

¹⁰ Ellen Nakashima and Warren P Strobel, "Trump Administration Job Candidates Loyalty Screening," *Washington Post*, February 8, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2025/02/08/trump-administration-job-candidates-loyalty-screening/>; Christine Berger, October 20, 2025, "Department of Justice's Broken Accountability System," Brennan Center,

having a pro-LGBTQ rights flag at his desk.¹¹ The administration also reversed existing policies designed to protect the civil service from becoming overtly partisan.¹² Lawsuits around these issues are ongoing.

b. Congressional **4/10 (down from 7/10 in 2024)**

- i. Does Congress operate independently of other branches of the government, particularly through oversight? **2/5 (down from 4/5 in 2024)**

Congress in 2025 failed to uphold its independence and its duty of oversight of the executive. With majorities in the House and Senate, Republicans declined to act independently of the executive branch and acquiesced in significant unilateral changes to the federal government that had never been approved in law. When the administration undertook to dismantle large portions of the federal government, like USAID, Congress failed to hold hearings or to call administration officials to account.

The Republican-controlled Senate confirmed numerous cabinet nominees who were clearly unqualified for their positions, like the anti-vaccine activist Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., appointed to the position of secretary of health and human services; the right-wing podcaster Kash Patel, appointed to the position of head of the FBI; and former *Fox & Friends* host Peter Hegseth, appointed as secretary of defense. In doing so, key Congressional Republicans ignored their duty to vet the candidates and ensure they had adequate professional qualifications, character, and were free of conflicts of interest.

<https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/department-justices-broken-accountability-system>; "Trump's NIH Shake up Pushes Out Vetted Scientists and Leaves Grant Panels Understaffed," EHN, <https://www.ehn.org/trumps-nih-shake-up-pushes-out-vetted-scientists-and-leaves-grant-panels-understaffed>.

¹¹ Scott MacFarlane, "FBI Lawsuit Employee Fired Pride Flag," CBS News, November 19, 2025, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/fbi-lawsuit-employee-fired-pride-flag/>.

¹² "Fact Sheet: New Guidance Renders Meaningless Laws That Prevent Partisan Politics from Infecting the Federal Workforce," Civil Service Strong, <https://www.civilservicestrong.org/resources/fact-sheet-new-guidance-renders-meaningless-laws-that-prevent-partisan-politics-from-infecting-the-federal-workforce>.

Late in 2025, there were some signs that Congressional Republicans had become interested in oversight, particularly related to the administration's signaled desire for regime change in Venezuela (not realized until 2026) and the associated extralegal campaign of military strikes in the Caribbean.

- ii. Does Congress legislate on matters of national importance, particularly within its mandated areas of responsibility such as appropriations? **2/5 (down from 3/5 in 2024)**

In July, Congress passed the so-called “Big Beautiful Bill,” (BBB) an omnibus bill with major changes to federal taxes, as well as cuts to funding for government agencies, support for health insurance costs, federal food assistance, and many other programs. All Democrats opposed the bill in the House and Senate; while a small number of Republicans voted against it in both houses, enough supported it for passage.

Despite Republicans controlling both houses of Congress and the presidency, Democrats were then able to block passage of a continuing resolution that would have kept funding the government at existing levels, in an effort to force Congress to adopt a law that would blunt measures in the BBB which would drastically increase insurance costs for millions of people. The lack of a funding agreement led to a forty-three-day shutdown of the federal government, the longest in history. Congress did not agree on a measure to prevent the rise in health insurance costs by the end of the year.

- c. Judicial **2/5 (down from 3/5 in 2024)**

- i. Does the judiciary fulfill its role in a nonpartisan manner? **2/5 (down from 3/5 in 2024)**

As noted above, federal courts at levels below the Supreme Court repeatedly acted throughout the year to deny administration priorities, question its justifications, and force

it to comply with the law. However, the partisan bent of the federal judiciary due to its appointment and confirmation practices, and particularly of the Supreme Court, led to highly partisan outcomes that legal scholars skewered as based in politics and not law. Most crucially, in July 2025, the Supreme Court [lifted a lower court injunction](#) that would have stopped President Trump's extralegal reorganization of the federal government, despite the lack of Congressional authorization.¹³ In December 2025, the Supreme Court [lifted a different lower court injunction](#) that would have prevented Texas from using an overtly partisan gerrymander for its upcoming elections.¹⁴ As with many recent key decisions, these were taken on the Court's "shadow docket," meaning no detailed reasoning was given, though the Court indicated that it would likely find the administration's actions lawful.

The situation has led to growing frustration expressed by federal judges with the Supreme Court and its evident partisanship, as well as lack of detailed reasoning.¹⁵

d. Corruption 1/5 (down from 3/5 in 2024)

**i. Is grand corruption prohibited in law and punished in practice? 1/5
(down from 3/5 in 2024)**

The second Trump administration has openly engaged in grand corruption.

Pardons have been transactional in the past, but the second Trump administration has taken them to a new level. The largest example is Changpeng Zhao, the founder of the

¹³ "Massive Coalition of Unions, Non-Profit Groups and Local Governments File Omnibus Challenge to Unconstitutional Reorganization of Federal Government," Democracy Forward, <https://democracyforward.org/updates/massive-coalition-of-unions-non-profit-groups-and-local-governments-file-omnibus-challenge-to-unconstitutional-reorganization-of-federal-government/>.

¹⁴ "Abbott v. League of United Latin American Citizens," SCOTUSblog, <https://www.scotusblog.com/cases/case-files/abbott-v-league-of-united-latin-american-citizens/>.

¹⁵ Lawrence Hurley, "In Rare Interviews, Federal Judges Criticize Supreme Court's Handling of Trump Cases," NBC News, September 4, 2025, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/supreme-court/supreme-court-trump-cases-federal-judges-criticize-rcna221775>.

cryptocurrency firm Binance, who had pleaded guilty to failing to prevent money laundering on the platform. He was pardoned after helping channel \$2 billion to a cryptocurrency venture run by Trump's family, World Liberty Financial. Other cryptocurrency and tech company interests have made major donations to advance their agendas with the administration, [and have been rewarded with favorable regulatory steps](#).¹⁶ In other cases, companies agreed to deals that benefit the Trump family, [like the \\$28 million “licensing fee”](#) that Amazon paid to the first lady, Melania Trump, for producing a documentary about her.¹⁷ In perhaps the most flagrant example of currying favor through cash, media and social media companies have paid presidential interests tens of millions of dollars to settle lawsuits he had brought against them and which he had little chance of winning in court.¹⁸

In addition to those pardons that were direct pay-for-play transactions with the administration, there have been other pardons that have also reinforced that corruption is acceptable throughout government. In December 2025, Trump [pardoned U.S. House Democratic representative Henry Cuellar](#), who had faced prosecution for accepting some \$600,000 worth of bribes from Azerbaijan.¹⁹

2. Nonstate Sectors **20/30 (down from 26/30 in 2024)**

a. Media and Social Media **8/12 (down from 10/12 in 2024)**

- i. Do news media and social media institutions operate independent of gross and disproportionate political pressure? **3/4 (down from 4/4 in 2024)**

¹⁶ "CLC Corruption Tracker Nov20," Campaign Legal, November 20, 2025, https://campaignlegal.org/sites/default/files/2025-11/CLC_Corruption_Tracker_Nov20.pdf.

¹⁷ "Trump's Take," American Progress, <https://www.americanprogress.org/feature/trumps-take/>.

¹⁸ "CBS News Paramount Trump 60 Minutes Lawsuit Settlement," CBS News, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/paramount-trump-60-minutes-lawsuit-settlement/>.

¹⁹ Gabby Birenbaum, "Donald Trump Pardons Texas Democrat Henry Cuellar," *Texas Tribune*, December 3, 2025, <https://www.texastribune.org/2025/12/03/henry-cuellar-donald-trump-pardon-bribery/>.

The United States does not have a public broadcaster, but the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) and National Public Radio (NPR) have received federal funding for decades to support publicly available media. In 2025, Congress and the administration worked together to [cut funding to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting](#), which had channeled funds to these institutions and through them to hundreds of local channels.²⁰ (In early 2026, outside the period in consideration for this score, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting voted to shutter its doors rather than remain as a dormant and unfunded organization.)²¹ As part of its reorganization of the federal government, the administration also sought to close Voice of America, a publicly funded broadcaster that provided news to overseas audiences, and to cut funding to other outward-facing U.S. government media projects. These cuts led to thousands of layoffs, some of which are still in litigation.

Upon taking office, President Trump said he would not be enforcing the law, passed by Congress and signed by President Biden, requiring the Chinese company ByteDance to divest itself of ownership of TikTok in the United States. A Supreme Court ruling had upheld the law just before the transfer of power to Trump, and there was no legal mechanism in place for Trump to suspend the law. But Trump's decision not to enforce means that TikTok has continued to operate in the United States despite being legally banned, while its owners seek to negotiate a deal with the administration.²² This fact raises both censorship and content moderation issues, as the administration could exert influence over the platform while it is negotiating; and corruption issues, as the platform and administration could seek to make a profit for the president as part of any transfer of

²⁰ David Bauder, "PBS NPR Stations Struggle with Trump-Fueled Government Funding Cuts," First Amendment MTSU, October 27, 20225, <https://firstamendment.mtsu.edu/post/pbs-npr-stations-struggle-with-trump-fueled-government-funding-cuts>.

²¹ "Corporation for Public Broadcasting Board Votes to Dissolve Organization in Act of Responsible Stewardship to Protect the Future of Public Media," Corporation for Public Broadcasting press release, January 5, 2026, <https://cpb.org/pressroom/corporation-public-broadcasting-board-votes-dissolve-organization-act-responsible>.

²² Lily Jamali, "What's Next for TikTok in the US as Deal Prospects Remain Uncertain?," BBC, December 15, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cp34442z25ko>.

ownership. In late December 2025, a deal was announced to shift around half of the ownership of ByteDance to U.S. and Emirati firms close to the president.²³

By denying accreditation to reporters and outlets, the administration has purged the traditional press pool that has access to daily briefings on White House grounds, as well as the press pool that covers the Defense Department. These press roles were traditionally occupied by independent media that saw their role as understanding and explaining the government to audiences, and holding it to account. They are now held, in many cases by pro-government, social media influencers.²⁴

- ii. Are the news media and social media sectors vibrant in terms of ownership, viewpoints, and sustainability? **2/4 (down from 3/4 in 2024)**

U.S. news media and social media continue to be diverse and vibrant, and there is considerable investigative as well as beat reporting on the administration that reaches hundreds of millions of people.

The second Trump administration has applied heavy pressure to independent news media and social media, with significant results in terms of shaping personnel and ownership decisions. In the first months of the administration, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) placed three major broadcasters under investigation.²⁵ The timeline of the acquisition of Paramount (the parent company of CBS News) by Skydance, in particular, and the approval of the deal by the FCC in summer

²³ TikTok Owner Signs Deal to Avoid Us Ban," BBC, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cqexp1q8wn1o>

²⁴ "The Press Corps at the Defense Department Has Been Replaced by Far-Right Outlets," Steve Walsh, NPR, December 3, 2025,

<https://www.npr.org/2025/12/03/nx-s1-5630076/the-press-corps-at-the-defense-department-has-been-replaced-by-far-right-outlets>.

²⁵ Katherine Jacobsen, "Alarm Bells: Trump's First 100 Days Ramp up Fear for the Press, Democracy," Committee to Protect Journalists, April 30, 2025, <https://cpj.org/special-reports/alarm-bells-trumps-first-100-days-ramp-up-fear-for-the-press-democracy/>.

2025 led to criticism, from the sole Democratic-appointed commissioner to the FCC, that the administration had used its leverage over the deal to advance its political aims.²⁶

As mentioned above, media and social media companies settled a series of lawsuits from Trump, providing money to presidential institutions. At the CBS News program *60 Minutes*, presidential pressure led to resignations and staffing changes.²⁷ The administration openly applied pressure to news organizations using its influence on merger and ownership decisions, trying to use its leverage to force them to drop or edit stories.²⁸ Amazon founder and *Washington Post* owner Jeff Bezos changed its editorial line to align it more with the administration. Elon Musk, who owns the social media platform X and had campaigned for the president in 2024, joined the administration in the first half of 2025 in a semiformal capacity to help reorganize the federal government through chaotic firings and purges. He continued to support the president's priorities throughout the remainder of 2025. Other social media platforms tried to win the president's support through donations and friendly appearances.

The cuts to public broadcasting threatened sustainability, especially for local and rural radio stations and broadcasters.

iii. Do media and social media platforms operate with responsibility and accountability for their role in public discourse? **3/4 (unchanged from 2024)**

²⁶ "Commissioner Gomez on Closing of Paramount–Skydance Merger," Federal Communications Commission press release, August 7, 2025, <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DOC-413572A1.pdf>.

²⁷ Michael M. Grynbaum and Benjamin Mullin, "'60 Minutes' Chief Resigns in Emotional Meeting: 'The Company Is Done with Me,'" *New York Times*, April 22, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/22/business/media/cbs-60-minutes-trump-bill-owens.html>; Jeremy Barr, "CBS News Staffers React to Bari Weiss Being Named Editor-in-Chief: 'It's Utterly Depressing,'" *Guardian*, October 7, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2025/oct/07/cbs-news-staffers-react-bari-weiss-appointment>; Benjamin Mullin and Michael M. Grynbaum, "CBS Taps Conservative Policy Veteran for New Ombudsman Role," *New York Times*, September 8, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/08/business/media/cbs-news-ombudsman-kenneth-weinstein.html>.

²⁸ "The Politics Behind the \$8B Paramount–Skydance Merger," PBS NewsHour, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/the-politics-behind-the-8b-paramount-skydance-merger>.

Media and social media platforms continued to operate, in many cases, with responsibility and accountability. Despite the unprecedented degree of pressure that media outlets faced from the administration in 2025, there is no evidence in 2025 of a systematic change in how they are operating, in terms of their willingness to report, discuss, and engage in hard issues.

- b. Civil society and the private sector **10/12 (down from 12/12 in 2024)****
 - i. Do civil society organizations operate independent of undue political pressure? **3/4 (down from 4/4 in 2024)****

As part of the administration's attack on the federal government, organizations that implemented federal grants lost billions of dollars, leading to the closure of organizations and the transformation of many civil society groups. At the same time, some staff from these organizations were doxxed on social media and attacked by high-profile supporters of the president like Elon Musk, which in certain cases led to death threats and creation of an atmosphere of fear. Organizations closed internal communication channels for fear they could be subpoenaed or otherwise released to the public, and warned staff not to speak out publicly about the administration's actions. Nonprofits have described a climate of [fear and anxiety](#) about how to operate under the conditions set by the administration.²⁹

In September 2025, the administration reportedly ordered federal authorities to open investigations into the Open Society Foundations. At the same time, the president [signed an executive order](#) directing the government to dismantle "domestic terror networks," increasing fears of the weaponization of investigative powers against political

²⁹ Jessica Abrahams, "NGOs Say They're Under Attack From Trump—and Are Ready to Fight Back," Devex, November 17, 2025, <https://www.devex.com/news/ngos-say-they-re-under-attack-from-trump-and-are-ready-to-fight-back-111334>.

opponents.³⁰ Nonprofits have [denounced the government's statements](#) and potential policies.³¹

Behind the scenes in 2025, major civil society organizations in the United States have begun to dedicate resources to operational resilience, including exploring how to sustain operations should they be criminally investigated or otherwise threatened by the federal government.

- ii. Are civil society organizations vibrant in terms of representation, viewpoints, and sustainability? **4/4 (unchanged from 2024)**

Despite the threats and pressure against them, U.S. civil society continues to be vibrant and successful. Layoffs due to cuts in federal funding affected many organizations working domestically, though not at the scale of organizations that worked abroad through USAID and State Department funding.

- iii. Does the private sector operate independent of undue political pressure? **3/4 (down from 4/4 in 2024)**

Early in the second administration, the government targeted law firms through executive orders that accused them of threatening national security, though the allegations were connected to work they had done for Democratic administrations or campaigns, or to the previous investigations and prosecutions of President Trump. This transparently political targeting led to a series of settlements with the government from some firms, and the

³⁰ Jacob Knutsun, "Trump Order Targets Left-Leaning Nonprofits as Terror Network," *Democracy Docket*, September 25, 2025,

<https://www.democracydocket.com/news-alerts/trump-order-terrorism-network-left-leaning-nonprofits/>.

³¹ Stephanie Kirchgaessner, "US Non-Profits 'Lock Arms' amid Trump's Menacing of George Soros: 'We Will Not Be Intimidated,'" *Guardian*, October 17, 2025,

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/oct/17/george-soros-trump-non-profits>.

departure of a number of attorneys from various firms. The American Bar Association is [suing](#) over the administration's actions.³²

The administration has leaned heavily on private businesses in other sectors to support the president's agenda. For instance, in the sensitive area of semiconductor production, the administration has claimed that the leading manufacturer Nvidia will be allowed to sell chips in China [only if it pays a percentage of its sales](#) (from 15 to 25 percent) to the U.S. government—a “deal” that the government may not legally be able to make.³³

c. Higher Education **2/6 (down from 4/6 in 2024)**

i. Does higher education operate independent of undue political influence? **1/3 (down from 2/3 in 2024)**

Higher education has been an overt target of the second Trump administration. The administration used the leverage of investigations into antisemitism at universities to impose freezes on hundreds of millions of dollars in grants. Several universities—among them [Columbia](#), Brown, and Cornell—entered into settlements with the administration that included significant payments to the government and intrusive government oversight of hiring and admissions.³⁴

Anticipating pressure over diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs, universities began dismantling the programs, [in some cases preemptively](#).³⁵ These measures

³² “American Bar Association Files Suit to Halt Government Intimidation of Lawyers and Law Firms,” American Bar Association News, June 2025, <https://www.americanbar.org/news/abanews/aba-news-archives/2025/06/aba-files-suit-to-halt-govt-intimidation/>.

³³ Kevin Breuninger, “Trump Greenlights Nvidia H200 AI Chip Sales to China If U.S. Gets 25% Cut, Says XI Responded Positively,” CNBC, December 8, 2025, <https://www.cnbc.com/2025/12/08/trump-nvidia-h200-sales-china.html>.

³⁴ Jameel Jaffer et al., “What the Columbia Settlement Really Means,” Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University, August 4, 2025, <https://knightcolumbia.org/blog/what-the-columbia-settlement-really-means>.

³⁵ David Cole, “Profiles in Self-Censorship: DEI,” *New York Review of Books*, March 10, 2025, <https://www.nybooks.com/online/2025/03/10/profiles-in-self-censorship-dei/>.

affected even [the ability of student groups to offer clubs and activities](#), as universities feared repercussions.³⁶ As part of the same campaign against DEI, the administration also [cut funding](#) for important programs across a number of different areas of subject matter expertise (such as regional studies and foreign languages) and in areas that support [historically black colleges](#) and universities; the “Hispanic Serving Institutions” program was cut entirely.³⁷

- ii. Do higher education institutions protect the rights of professors, researchers, and students to engage in research, speech, and debate on controversial topics? **1/3 (down from 2/3 in 2024)**

State universities and their faculty have come under pressure from state governments to discipline instructors and other staff, often driven by student activists who target instructors who discuss topics that the students disapprove of. In one very prominent case, [an instructor at Texas A&M University was fired](#) after a student posted a video of an argument in class over gender identity.³⁸ Texas A&M’s president later resigned under political pressure. In Oklahoma, two instructors were [placed on leave](#) after giving a student a zero on an assignment in which she wrote that “pushing the lie that there are

³⁶ Erin Gretzinger and Maggie Hicks, “The Chaos of Compliance,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 22, 2025, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-chaos-of-compliance>.

³⁷ Vani Sanganeria, “Foreign Language and International Studies Funding Cut for Title VI Grants,” EdSource, <https://edsource.org/updates/foreign-language-international-studies-funding-cut-for-title-vi-grants>; “Department Ends Funding for Racially Discriminatory Grant Programs,” U.S. Department of Education press release, September 10, 2025, <https://www.ed.gov/about/news/press-release/us-department-of-education-ends-funding-racially-discriminatory-discretionary-grant-programs-minority-serving-institutions>; Andre M. Perry et al., “The Trump Administration’s Actions on Higher Education Aren’t Impacting HBCUs Yet,” Brookings Institution, September 15, 2025, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-trump-administrations-actions-on-higher-education-arent-impacting-hbcus-yet/>.

³⁸ Jack Flink, “Texas A&M University Fires Professor amid Backlash, Political Pressure over Use of Gender Identity in Children’s Literature Class,” CBS News, <https://www.cbsnews.com/texas/news/texas-a-m-university-fires-professor-political-pressure-gender-identity-children-literature-class-education/>.

multiple genders . . . is demonic.”³⁹ In July, the president of the University of Virginia resigned under direct pressure from the Trump administration, which had threatened to withhold funding for the university if he did not.⁴⁰

The result is that faculty and staff at universities are engaging in more self-censorship to avoid sensitive issues.

3. Rights **15/25 (down from 19/25 in 2024)**

a. Civil Rights **9/15 (down from 11/15 in 2024)**

- i. Is there freedom of expression without undue fear of persecution or retribution, especially for critics of the government? **3/5 (down from 4/5 in 2024)**

The second Trump administration has taken a range of steps to persecute members of the opposition and those who engage in speech that the administration disfavors. The president has openly called for the Justice Department to lodge charges against those he sees as his political enemies. The department has complied, bringing cases, at Trump’s request, against former FBI director James Comey and New York attorney general Letitia James. Though the cases are now stumbling due to various violations of due process, they have demonstrated the president’s desire and willingness to persecute his opponents.⁴¹

After the assassination of right-wing activist Charlie Kirk at a student event in Utah in September, the government sought to clamp down on speech it perceived as

³⁹ Tyler Kingkade and Jo Yurcaba, “How an Oklahoma Student’s Gender Essay Became a National Culture War Fight,” NBC News, December 14, 2025,

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/oklahoma-ou-student-essay-culture-war-rcna248530>.

⁴⁰ Mike Mather, “University of Virginia President Jim Ryan Resigns,” University of Virginia, June 27, 2025, <https://news.virginia.edu/content/university-virginia-president-jim-ryan-resigns>.

⁴¹ Eric Tucker, “Judge Dismisses Comey, James Indictments After Finding That Prosecutor Was Illegally Appointed,” AP News, November 25, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/comey-james-justice-department-5ec1a59d152bc1fd000ade15e20745b5>.

encouraging violence. Hundreds of people around the country lost their jobs in retribution.⁴²

- ii. Is there freedom of assembly, especially for critics of the government? **4/5 (unchanged from 2024)**

Extensive and repeated protests against the administration took place throughout the year. Despite government rhetoric against them, thousands of protests were held peacefully in locations around the country throughout the year.⁴³

- iii. Is there protection from arbitrary detention or arrest? **2/5 (down from 3/5 in 2024)**

Early in the year, the administration singled out noncitizens who had participated in or supported protests over Israel's genocide in Gaza for arrest and deportation. Mahmoud Khalil, a graduate student at Columbia University and lawful permanent resident in the United States, was arrested and put in immigration detention. He was released only after months in detention. Rumeysa Öztürk, a graduate student at Tufts University, was seized on the street by government agents and detained for two months. In these and several other cases, the only justification offered by the U.S. government was that these individuals' participation in pro-Palestinian activism presented a national security risk to the United States.

⁴² Raphael Satter and A.J. Vicens, "The Charlie Kirk Purge: How 600 Americans Were Punished in a Pro-Trump Crackdown," Reuters, November 19, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/investigations/charlie-kirk-purge-how-600-americans-were-punished-pro-trump-crackdown-2025-11-19/>.

⁴³ Erica Chenoweth et. al, "New Data Shows No Kings Was One of the Largest Days of Protest in US History," Waging Nonviolence, August 12, 2025, <https://wagingnonviolence.org/2025/08/new-data-shows-no-kings-was-one-of-the-largest-days-of-protest-in-us-history/>.

The administration's implementation of a policy of "mass deportation" resulted in widespread crackdowns on communities with large numbers of immigrants living in them. These operations included widespread abuses against communities, often broadcast by federal authorities as a means to intimidate others. In many documented cases, citizens and lawful permanent residents were detained and questioned, including forcibly, apparently on the basis of their physical appearance or proximity to immigration operations. These operations increased the risk of arbitrary detention and arrest.

The score declined by one point, instead of two or three, because the 2024 evaluation already considered the United States to have weak protections against arbitrary detention, reflected in extreme racial disparities in rates of arrest and imprisonment. Additionally, while the administration sought to increase its powers of detention and law enforcement, federal courts frequently resisted those tactics when given the opportunity to rule on them. Federal judges have repeatedly rejected some of the administration's most aggressive immigration detention tactics.⁴⁴ Near the end of 2025, the Supreme Court accepted a lower court ruling that had rejected the federal government's attempt to use the National Guard to enforce laws in Illinois. If the federal government were permitted to conduct such operations, the score would drop further.⁴⁵

b. Equality Before the Law **6/10 (down from 8/10 in 2024)**

i. Is there due process for all people? **3/5 (down from 4/5 in 2024)**

In a change from prior policies, the administration sought to create pretexts for deportation, including by arresting immigrants at their required court appearances, and

⁴⁴ Kyle Cheney, "Hundreds of Judges Reject Trump's Mandatory Detention Policy, with No End in Sight," Politico, January 5, 2026, <https://www.politico.com/news/2026/01/05/trump-administration-immigrants-mandatory-detention-00709494>.

⁴⁵ Amy Howe, "Supreme Court Rejects Trump's Effort to Deploy National Guard in Illinois," SCOTUSBlog, December 23, 2025, <https://www.scotusblog.com/2025/12/supreme-court-rejects-trumps-effort-to-deploy-national-guard-in-illinois/>.

by arresting and deporting immigrants without a criminal record. This created a double bind for immigrants, because appearing in court for their immigration hearing could be used as a means to detain and deport them, but not appearing would also create a pretext for deportation.

The administration has conducted a slew of deportations to third countries (in other words, different countries than where the deported individual came from) without adequate due process, often [dropping people into foreign countries](#) on different continents where they have no ties, income, or resources.⁴⁶

ii. Are there guarantees in law and practice of equal treatment for all people? **3/5 (down from 4/5 in 2024)**

The administration has explicitly targeted immigrant communities around the country, using methods that violate their rights (even though the scope of such rights is more limited than for citizens). The administration has put racist rhetoric into policy, as when Trump denounced Somalis as “garbage” and initiated federal immigration raids in Minnesota specifically targeting that community.

The dismantling of DEI policies in the federal government, universities, and other institutions has targeted programs and policies that sought to ensure or improve equal treatment. Targets include [research on the widespread racial disparities](#) in American society and some measures to prevent workplace and hiring discrimination.⁴⁷

4. Elections **12/15 (unchanged from 2024)**

⁴⁶ “Ghana: Detention and Secret Expulsions Raise Alarm over Role in U.S. Deportation Scheme,” Global Detention Project, October 21, 2025, <https://www.globaldetentionproject.org/ghana-detention-and-secret-expulsions-raise-alarm-over-role-in-u-s-deportation-scheme>.

⁴⁷ Roni Caryn Rabin and Irena Hwang, “Trump Administration Scraps Research Into Health Disparities,” *New York Times*, August 13, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/13/health/nih-grant-cancellations-dei.html>.

a. Vote Counting **5/5 (unchanged from 2024)**

i. Are votes counted accurately? **5/5 (unchanged from 2024)**

Though the Trump administration has spoken extensively about voter fraud in the United States, the administration of elections remains a responsibility of the states. There is no evidence that there are systematic problems with vote-counting, nor were there new issues in elections held in 2025.

There are significant concerns looking forward. The Trump administration purged the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, which left a significant gap in information-sharing, preparation, and capabilities for responding to foreign as well as domestic threats that could impact future elections.⁴⁸ Local election officials are concerned about gaps in election security services as a result.⁴⁹

b. Ability to Cast a Vote **4/5 (unchanged from 2024)**

i. Are there undue constraints on the ability to cast a vote? **4/5 (unchanged from 2024)**

As noted in the 2024 report, there are longstanding issues in the United States in terms of the ability of voters to cast a vote. There were no new issues in 2025 that would change this evaluation. In March, President Trump issued an executive order purporting to require that voters show a document proving citizenship when registering to vote. That

⁴⁸ Eric Geller, “Loses Nearly All Top Officials as Purge Continues,” *Cybersecurity Dive*, May 27, 2025, <https://www.cybersecuritydive.com/news/cisa-senior-official-departures/748992/>; Eric Geller, “CISA Loses Key Employee Behind Early Ransomware Warnings,” *Cybersecurity Dive*, December 23, 2025, <https://www.cybersecuritydive.com/news/cisa-ransomware-warning-program-key-employee-left/808589/>.

⁴⁹ “Local Election Officials Survey—July 2025,” Brennan Center for Justice, July 10, 2025, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/local-election-officials-survey-july-2025>.

executive order was [blocked by the courts](#) because the president does not have power over elections, and has not been implemented.⁵⁰

The [executive order](#) in March sought to advance federal claims over election administration despite the clear constitutional mandate to the states, and the administration has consistently pressed debunked claims of fraud in U.S. elections.⁵¹ In line with the executive order, the administration has been pressing states to use an existing federal database, called [Systematic Alien Verification for Entitlements \(SAVE\)](#), to verify voter eligibility. Not all states have agreed to participate.⁵² Based on information released at the end of 2025, it is possible some states will reach agreements with the federal government [to remove voters from the rolls](#) based on federal review, which would mean a significant shift in power to the federal level.⁵³

c. Structural 3/5 (unchanged from 2024)

- i. Do the structural conditions of elections permit the rise of new political entrants, fair competition among candidates/parties, and adequate representation of voters? **3/5 (unchanged from 2024)**

There were key developments in 2025 related to gerrymandering, though they have not yet had the chance for their impact to be seen in actual elections. In response to urging from President Trump, Texas's Republican-majority state legislature adopted an even

⁵⁰ "Court Strikes Down Key Part of Trump's Unlawful Voting Executive Order, Permanently Blocking Show-Your-Papers Requirement," Brennan Center for Justice, October 31, 2025, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/court-strikes-down-key-part-trumps-unlawful-voting-executive-order>.

⁵¹ "Preserving and Protecting the Integrity of American Elections," White House, March 25, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/03/preserving-and-protecting-the-integrity-of-american-elections/>.

⁵² Natalia Contreras, "State Election Directors Press for Answers on Using Save to Check Voter Citizenship," *Votebeat*, July 28, 2025, <https://www.votebeat.org/2025/07/28/save-immigration-database-nased-conference-oklahoma-city-election-officials/>.

⁵³ Jonathan Shorman, "Trump's DOJ Offers States Confidential Deal to Remove Voters Flagged by Feds," *Stateline*, December 18, 2025, <https://stateline.org/2025/12/18/trumps-doj-offers-states-confidential-deal-to-wipe-voters-flagged-by-feds-as-ineligible/>.

more radically gerrymandered map that would further disenfranchise Democratic voters. California voters responded by approving a referendum to [adopt their own gerrymandered map](#) to disenfranchise Republicans in California.⁵⁴ North Carolina also adopted a gerrymandered map to reduce Democratic representation in Congress.

In 2025, the Supreme Court heard a case that would strike down another key provision of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which had already been severely curtailed in previous rulings. Observers [believe](#) the court is likely to strike down a map that Louisiana had drawn in response to previous rulings, this time because “non-African-American voters” had sued, saying its majority-Black districts disenfranchised them.⁵⁵ The Supreme Court also used its shadow docket (see above) to reverse a lower court’s pause on Texas’s gerrymander.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Maya C. Miller and Jeanne Kuang, “California Voters Approve Prop. 50, Redrawing Congressional Maps to Favor Democrats,” *CalMatters*, November 4, 2025, <https://calmatters.org/politics/2025/11/proposition-50-newsom-election-day/>.

⁵⁵ Amy Howe, “Court Appears Ready to Curtail Major Provision of the Voting Rights Act,” *SCOTUSblog*, October 15, 2025, <https://www.scotusblog.com/2025/10/court-appears-ready-to-curtail-major-provision-of-the-voting-rights-act/>

⁵⁶ Amy Howe, “Supreme Court Allows Texas to Use Redistricting Map Challenged as Racially Discriminatory,” *SCOTUSblog*, December 4, 2025, <https://www.scotusblog.com/2025/12/supreme-court-allows-texas-to-use-redistricting-map-challenged-as-racially-discriminatory/>.