

## Is Democracy in Decline?

### Overview

In this lesson, students read a text that examines recent research into the question of whether democratic forms of government are in decline in the world, and also whether young people have less affinity for democracy than in the past. Next, they participate in a Civil Conversation based on the reading. In this structured discussion method, under the guidance of a facilitator (the teacher), participants are encouraged to engage intellectually with challenging materials, gain insight about their own point of view, and strive for a shared understanding of issues.

### Standards and Topics

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.A  
Come to discussions prepared, having read and researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence from texts and other research on the topic or issue to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.C  
Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D  
Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.

**Topics:** democracy, authoritarianism, liberal democracy, individual rights, millennials

### Objectives

Students will be able to:

1. Define liberal democracy, individual rights, and authoritarian government.
2. Compare competing research on whether democracy is declining in the world.
3. Participate in Civil Conversation, which will enable them to:
  - a. Gain a deeper understanding of a controversial issue.
  - b. Use close reading skills to analyze a text.
  - c. Present text-based claims.
  - d. Develop speaking, listening, and analytical skills.
  - e. Identify common ground among differing views.

### Materials

[Handout A: Is Democracy in Decline?](#) (one per student)

[Handout B: Civil Conversation Guide](#) (one per student)

# Procedure

## I. Focus Discussion

- A. Ask students, “How do you define democracy?” (*Look for answers that include rule by the people or the people electing their leaders.*) Remind students that they live in a democracy.
- B. Ask students, “What is your role in a democracy?” (*Accept reasonable responses, such as voting, exercising rights like freedom of speech, or organizing with others toward common goals of improving society.*) Remind students that their role in democracy is crucial to the survival of democracy.
- C. Tell students that today they will be looking at some basic information about the status of democracy in the world. Some think democracy is declining and being replaced by less free forms of government. Students will discuss this idea and decide for themselves what they about it.

## II. Reading: Is Democracy in Decline?

- A. Briefly provide students with an overview of the purpose and rationale of the Civil Conversation activity. Use the Overview above to help you.

Give each student a copy of [Handout A: Is Democracy in Decline?](#)

- B. Civil Conversation Guide

Distribute a copy of [Handout B: Civil Conversation Guide](#) to each student to complete as they read. (Each student should fill in his/her own guide.)

## III. Activity: Civil Conversation

- A. Divide the class into groups of 3–4 students. You may want to have each group select a leader who will get the discussion started, ensure the group stays on-task, and finishes on time.
- B. Determine how much time the groups have to complete the discussion. (You will know what’s best for your students, depending on the length of the reading and how experienced your students are in student-directed discussion.)
  - Time: Conversations for classroom purposes should have a time limit, generally ranging from 15 to 45 minutes and an additional five minutes to reflect on the effectiveness of the conversations. The reflection time is an opportunity to ask any students who have not spoken to comment on the things they have heard. Ask them who said something that gave them a new insight that they agreed or disagreed with.
  - Small Groups: This discussion strategy is designed to ensure the participation of every student. Groups of 3-4 students are ideal. If you are scaffolding text for various reading levels, group together students who will use the same text.
- C. Review the rules of a Civil Conversation (listed under Step 3 on the Guide) and direct the groups to follow the instructions on the Guide to get started.
- D. Let groups know you will be circulating to listen in on their conversations and that each person in a group is expected to participate. The goal is for everyone to contribute equally to the conversation.
- E. If necessary, remind groups of the time and urge them to move to the next steps.

#### IV. Assessment/Closure

- A. After the groups have completed their discussions, debrief the activity by having the class reflect on the effectiveness of the conversation:
- What did you learn from the Civil Conversation?
  - What common ground did you find with other members of the group?
  - Do you still have questions about this issue? If so, what are they? How can you find answers to them?
  - Ask all participants to suggest ways in which the conversation could be improved. If appropriate, have students add the suggestions to their list of conversation rules.
- B. For assessment, look for the following on each student's Civil Conversation Guide:
- Step 2 – A, B: Basic understanding of text.
- Step 2 – C, D: Text-based arguments.
- Step 2 – E: Appropriate and compelling questions about the text.
- Step 4 – A: Level of participation (should be “about the same as others”).
- Step 4 – B: Answer is appropriately related to topic/issue presented in text.
- Step 4 – C, D: Specificity/text-based.
- C. For additional assessment, you may want to collect the article/text students used to assess the annotations they made in terms of connections to prior knowledge/experience, questions they had while reading, and comments they made.

## Is Democracy in Decline?

To define our system of republican government, the U.S. Constitution depends upon a series of principles, or fundamental doctrines. They include, among others, the rule of law, a commitment to popular sovereignty, and a respect for the inalienable rights of individuals and minorities.

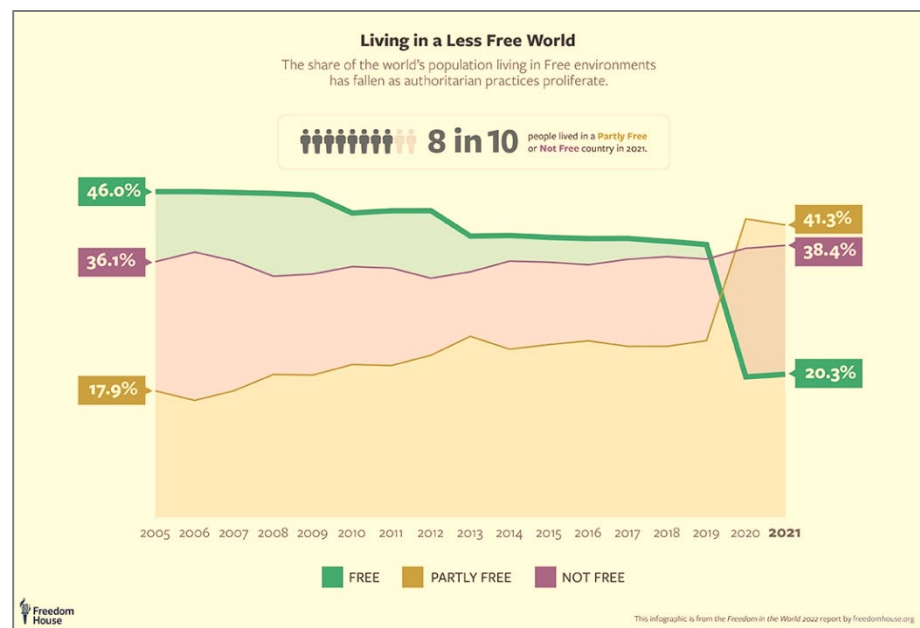
These principles make the U.S. Constitution an attractive model for emerging democracies. During the 18th and 19th centuries, many nations overthrew monarchs or established their independence from colonial powers. France, Bolivia, and Argentina are all examples of republics, or constitutional democracies, that were inspired by the U.S. Constitution. Systems that protect individual rights, such as free speech, freedom of religion, and the right to vote, are known as liberal democracies.

The number of nations adopting new democratic constitutions and provisions from the U.S. Constitution increased dramatically during the 20th century, particularly after World War 2. By the end of the 1990s, 120 of the world's 192 nations had adopted such constitutions. However, in the first decades of the 21st century, the pendulum started to swing away from constitutional democracy and toward authoritarian government, or government that depends on powerful leaders with strict limits on citizens' personal freedoms. Authoritarian regimes with constitutions are known as illiberal democracies, where rights may exist on paper but are not protected in practice. Some experts have begun to think that democracy around the world may be vulnerable.

### Signs of Decline

Freedom House, an independent organization, has rated governments "Free," "Partly Free," and "Not Free" for more than 70 years. Using criteria such as the rule of law, free press, protection of minority rights, government functioning, and free and fair elections, Freedom House regularly scores nations around the world.

Freedom House's 2022 report concluded that democracy faced a "dire threat." According to its analysis, 60 countries had declines in civil rights and political rights within one year, while only 25 countries made gains. The report noted that only 20 percent of the global population lived in Free countries, such as the United States, Brazil, South Africa, Namibia, Japan, South Korea, and most countries in Western and Central Europe.



Under Freedom House's analysis, countries with less developed democratic institutions are Partly Free. These countries may have elections and some civil liberties but are not liberal democracies. They may include governments marked by corruption scandals. Mexico, Colombia, India, Pakistan, Ukraine, and Hungary fell into this Freedom House category. Countries considered Not Free according to Freedom House's report include China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela.

Even in Western Europe, certain new political leaders and parties have been on the rise that seek power through majority rule but oppose many principles of liberal democracy. Some seek to restrict minority rights, the press, and free trade. Some favor authoritarian and nationalistic policies, such as militarism, repression of minorities, and drastic restrictions on immigration.

Other experts have also raised concerns. Roberto Foa and Yascha Mounk from the University of Melbourne in Australia and Harvard University, respectively, studied survey responses to the World Values Survey from 2010-2014. The survey has catalogued peoples' values and beliefs about democracy in nearly 100 countries since 1981. The researchers reported the troubling findings that there was less support for democracy among people living in six liberal democracies than in previous surveys.

Even more disturbing was the finding that the Millennial generation (those born between 1981 and 1996) were more negative about democracy than older generations across the globe, and especially in the United States. For example, the survey asked Americans if they thought it absolutely important "to live in a country governed democratically." Only about 30 percent of millennials agreed, whereas 72 percent of Americans born before World War 2 agreed. Also, 26 percent of millennials thought it was not essential for people "to choose their leaders in a free election." Mounk concluded that throughout the world only a minority of young citizens believe it is essential to live in a democracy.

## Signs of Hope

Not everyone agrees that democracy is in decline, or that younger people are abandoning it. Professor of government and international relations Pippa Norris published a comprehensive study about the state of democracy in the world. In her Harvard University School of Government research, she found no evidence that "political rights and civil liberties" had declined in the established western liberal democracies from 1972 to 2016.

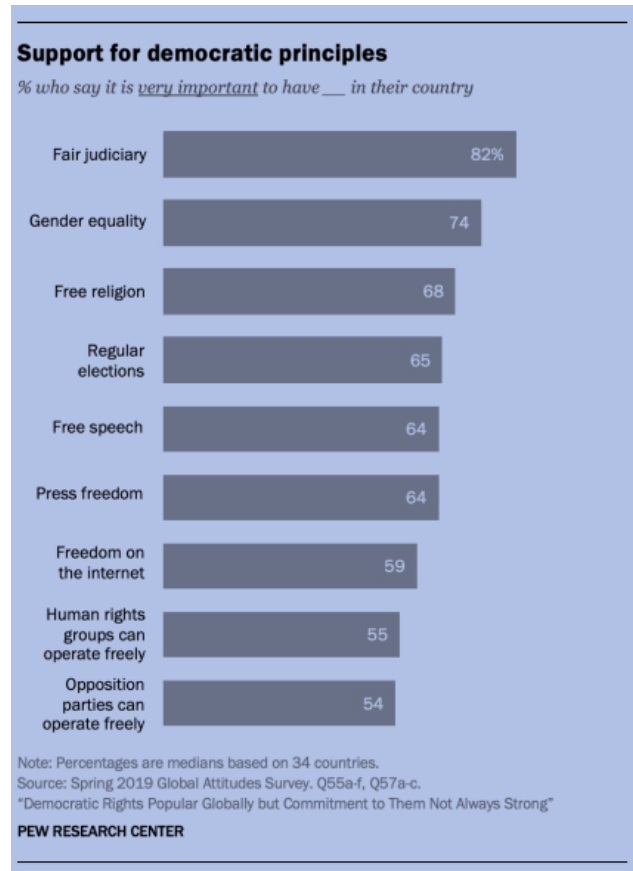
Certain critics also argue that it is misleading to point to countries such as Russia, Hungary, Poland, and Egypt that have become more authoritarian. They point out that these countries and others like them were not founded as liberal democracies. All had long-term histories of authoritarian governments before they became democracies. It has been difficult for them to develop democratic institutions and traditions.

Critics also note that while new authoritarian political parties and movements have arisen in Western democracies and the United States, they have met significant resistance. For example, in 2017 and again in 2022, French voters rejected the right-wing populist and anti-immigrant presidential candidate Marine Le Pen. And courts and other democratic institutions have pushed back against authoritarian and anti-immigrant policies in Germany and the United States.

The Lowry Institute Poll in Australia reported that only 39 percent of 18-29 year-olds expressed a preference for democracy in a 2012 poll, but that number increased to 54 percent in a 2016 poll. This might mean that opinions are more reflective of local political and economic conditions rather than any feelings of deep conviction. Poll results may reflect the evolution of one's views as well as potential frustration with extreme political partisanship or the perception that government cannot get anything done. It may be important to consider whether criticism is levied at the value of the liberal democratic process or at the imperfect and sometimes messy results of democratic processes in action.

In a 34-nation survey in February 2020, Pew Research Center found that democracy is a popular idea globally. A large majority of people strongly value democratic principles, with a fair judiciary (court system), gender equality, freedom of religion, and regular elections topping the list. Fifty-two percent of people across all 34 countries, however, are dissatisfied with how their democracy is functioning.

These debates will continue. Foa and Mounk point out that many people have assumed that extremist candidates would not be electable in democracies, and that democracies would not come under attack from within. But both have happened. "Now is the time to stop being complacent," they warn.



## Discussion

1. Explain the differences between authoritarian and liberal democratic governments.
2. Which is stronger, the signs of decline or the signs of hope? Why?

## CIVIL CONVERSATION GUIDE

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Class: \_\_\_\_\_

Title of Reading: \_\_\_\_\_

### Step 1: Read.

A. Read through the entire selection without stopping to think about any particular section.

B. Re-read the selection and annotate (“talk to”) the text:

Underline the main/most important points. You can comment on these points in the margins.

Circle words or phrases that are unknown or confusing to you.

Write down any questions you have in the margin labeling them with a “?”.

Draw an ➡ in the margin next to text that connects to something you know from outside the text. Note what the connection is, such as a news item or personal experience.

### Step 2: Think about the reading to prepare for the discussion.

A. This reading is about...

B. The MAIN POINTS are:

C. In the reading, I agree with:

D. In the reading, I disagree with:

E. What are two questions about this reading that you think could be discussed? (The best questions for discussion are ones that have no simple answer and that can use the text as evidence.)

1.

2.

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### Step 3: Discuss and listen.

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#### RULES FOR CIVIL CONVERSATION

1. Everyone in your group should participate in the conversation.
2. Listen carefully to what others are saying.
3. Ask clarifying questions if you do not understand a point raised.
4. Be respectful of what others are saying.
5. Refer to the text to support your ideas.

You will have \_\_\_\_\_ minutes to discuss. Your goal is to engage with each other and the text to gain insight about your own point of view while finding a shared understanding of the issue.

At the end of the reading, you will likely find at least one discussion question. Use that question to get your discussion started. If time permits, you can also discuss questions you came up with in Section E above.

If the reading does not provide discussion questions, choose questions to discuss from Section E.

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### Step 4: After your conversation...

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A. Compared to others in your group, did you speak? \_\_\_ Less than, \_\_\_ About the same as, \_\_\_ More than others.

B. Note some of the ways you added to the discussion.

C. What evidence did you use from the text to add to the discussion? Why was this evidence helpful?

D. What did you learn about the topic from the Civil Conversation? (Be sure to reference the text!)