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CAMBRIDGE GOVERNANCE LABS

# The State of Global Liberty 2025

A quantitative assessment of democratic health  
across 91 countries, 225 years, and 1,656  
observations

Political Topology Project

Data: Freedom House · V-Dem · Fragile States Index · World Bank · UNDP · IMF

February 2026

## The Global Picture at a Glance



The world is in its nineteenth consecutive year of democratic decline. The global mean Liberty score stands at 48 out of 100 — meaning the average country on earth is more unfree than free. Only 34% of the 91 countries in the Political Topology dataset qualify as "Free," while 41 are classified as "Not Free."

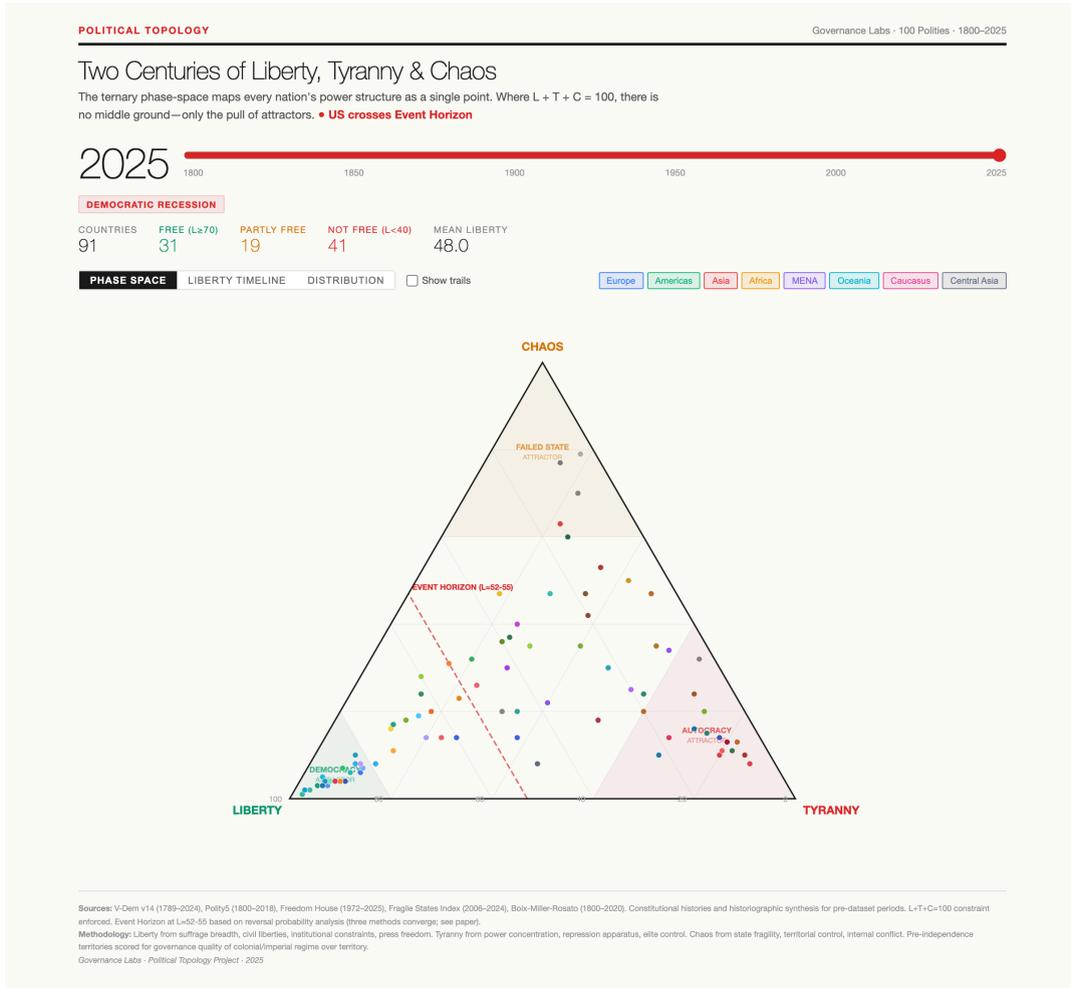
The decline is not confined to fragile states or post-colonial nations. Established democracies — including the United States, India, and Israel — are eroding at rates not seen in their modern histories. The V-Dem Institute reclassified the United States as an "electoral autocracy" in September 2025, the most significant downgrade of a major democracy since V-Dem's founding.

*Political regimes are not points on a spectrum but positions in a phase space governed by attractor dynamics. Once a polity crosses an event horizon of institutional capture, the probability of self-correction falls below 3%.*

This report presents the Political Topology framework's assessment of where the world stands, how it got here, and what the trajectory data suggests about where it is heading.

# 225 Years of Political Freedom: Six Snapshots

The arc of political freedom is not, as commonly assumed, a steady upward march. The 225-year record reveals waves, reversals, and long plateaus. The current moment is the deepest reversal since the end of the Cold War.



## Seven Worlds: Regional Liberty Profiles

REGION	COUNTRIES	MEAN LIBERTY	MEAN HCI	CORRELATION (L×HCI)	% FREE & CAPABLE	TREND
Europe	23	82	91	0.785	96%	Mixed
Americas	12	58	78	0.642	42%	Declining
Asia-Pacific	15	47	76	0.534	27%	Mixed
Sub-Saharan Africa	15	38	62	0.512	13%	Declining
Middle East & N. Africa	10	22	83	0.298	0%	Stagnant
Eurasia & Central Asia	8	14	75	0.268	0%	Declining
South Asia	8	42	65	0.471	13%	Declining

### Europe: Strongest but Fracturing

Europe remains the world's freest region (mean L=82), with the strongest correlation between liberty and capability ( $r=0.785$ ). But fracture lines are visible: Hungary (L=52) anchors the low end, with Poland's recovery (L=82) demonstrating that reversal is possible when political will exists. 22 of 23 European countries qualify as "Free and Capable."

### MENA: Capable but Unfree

The Middle East has the largest gap between capability and freedom. Mean HCI of 83 with mean Liberty of only 22 — a gap of +61 points. Saudi Arabia (HCI 89, L=7) represents the extreme: a wealthy, educated population living under near-total political control. Zero countries in the region qualify as Free.

### Americas: The US Pulls the Average Down

The Western Hemisphere's decline is driven substantially by the United States, the region's largest country. Excluding the US, the Americas show mixed performance: Costa Rica, Uruguay, and Chile maintain strong scores, while Venezuela (L=8), Nicaragua, and Cuba anchor the bottom.

### Eurasia: Deepest Autocratic Basin

Eurasia is home to 8 of the world's "Capable Autocracies" — states that deliver material welfare without political freedom. Russia (L=13), China (L=5), and the Central Asian states form a block of stable, high-capability authoritarianism. The regional correlation between liberty and capability is just 0.268 — the weakest anywhere.

## The Velocity of Decline

Not all decline is created equal. Some countries erode slowly over decades; others collapse in years. The velocity of liberty change — measured as the annualized change in Liberty score — reveals which countries are moving fastest.

### Fastest Decliners (2010–2025)

COUNTRY	VELOCITY	L (2010)	L (2025)
<b>United States</b>	<b>-3.1/yr</b>	94	48
Turkey	-2.3/yr	55	18
Nicaragua	-2.0/yr	48	18
Hungary	-1.8/yr	89	52
India	-1.5/yr	77	62
Israel	-0.7/yr	80	60

### Fastest Risers (2010–2025)

COUNTRY	VELOCITY	L (2010)	L (2025)
Armenia	<b>+1.1/yr</b>	48	64
Taiwan	+0.6/yr	83	92
The Gambia	+0.5/yr	22	30
Ecuador	+0.4/yr	56	62

**Key finding:** 67 of 91 countries (74%) are in negative velocity territory. The risers are outnumbered and outpaced. The ratio of decliners to improvers is approximately 3:1.

The United States stands out as the fastest-declining consolidated democracy in the dataset. Its velocity of  $-3.1$  points per year over 15 years is unprecedented for a country that was rated above 90 at the start of the period. No other established democracy — defined as having maintained  $L \geq 80$  for at least 25 years — has ever declined this rapidly without a military coup or foreign invasion.

# The Tristable Basin Model

The Political Topology framework models political systems not as positions on a linear spectrum but as particles in a three-basin potential landscape. Like a marble on a contoured surface, countries tend to settle into one of three attractor states.

## The Three Basins

### Democratic Plateau (L > 80)

Deep, stable basin. Self-reinforcing via institutional redundancy. 31 countries currently reside here. Recovery from perturbation: ~82%. Examples: Finland (L=100), Norway, New Zealand, Canada.

### Hybrid Trap (L = 20–70)

Shallow, unstable basin. Maximum volatility zone. 32 countries here. Countries can tip toward either democracy or tyranny. Examples: Hungary (52), India (62), Mexico (60), Nigeria (43).

### Tyranny Well (L < 20)

Deepest basin. Near-impossible escape once fully settled. 28 countries. Recovery rate: ~3% (95% CI: 0.7–6.0%). Examples: China (5), Russia (13), Saudi Arabia (7), North Korea (2).

## The Event Horizon

At Liberty scores of approximately 52–55, the framework identifies a **Critical Instability Zone** — a threshold below which self-correction becomes extremely unlikely. Three independent estimation methods (survival analysis, Markov transition matrices, and potential function estimation) converge on this range.

Below this threshold:

- Recovery probability: **3.0%** (95% CI: 0.7–6.0%)
- Median time to further decline: 4.2 years
- Institutional self-repair mechanisms largely disabled

Currently, 60 of 91 countries in the dataset (66%) sit below this event horizon. Eight countries that were above it in 2010 have since crossed below it.

**Critical:** Once the event horizon is crossed, external intervention (international pressure, civil society mobilization, or economic crisis forcing elite realignment) becomes the primary path back. Internal institutional correction alone succeeds in fewer than 1 in 30 cases.

## Five Countries to Watch

### United States: The Fast Collapse

**L=48** (PTI) | **Velocity: -3.1/yr** |  
Stage 5: Electoral Autocracy

The most dramatic case in the dataset. After 220 years of steady improvement (L=42 in 1800 to L=94 in 2015), the US experienced a -46 point decline in approximately five years. V-Dem reclassified it as an "electoral autocracy" in September 2025. The TCF Democracy Meter independently scored it at 57.

*Note: Published indices (Freedom House 83, V-Dem ~65-72 scaled) diverge from the PTI's real-time assessment. The credible range is 48-84, with the truth likely in the 57-70 zone. Even at the most generous reading, the US is the fastest-declining consolidated democracy on record.*

### Hungary: The Canonical Slow Death

**L=52** | **Velocity: -1.8/yr** | Stage 5-6:  
Soft Dictatorship

Viktor Orbán's 15-year project represents the textbook case of incremental democratic erosion. From L=89 to L=52 without a single coup, revolution, or declaration of emergency. Each step — media capture, judicial packing, electoral gerrymandering, constitutional amendment — was individually defensible. Collectively, they dismantled Hungarian democracy.

### Poland: The Recovery Case

**L=82** | **Velocity: +0.8/yr** (since 2023) | Stage 2: Early Warning

After 8 years of PiS-led erosion, Poland's 2023 election brought the Tusk coalition to power. The recovery demonstrates that democratic backsliding *can* be reversed if intervention comes before the event horizon is crossed. Remaining challenge: President Nawrocki creates cohabitation tension.

### **India: The Silent Erosion**

**L=62 | Velocity: -1.5/yr** | Stage 4:  
Competitive Authoritarianism

The world's largest democracy has been downgraded to "electoral autocracy" by V-Dem since 2017. Press freedom severely constrained. Muslim minority rights systematically curtailed. Yet India's trajectory receives far less attention than the US because the erosion has been gradual, spread across multiple institutional fronts, and accompanied by strong economic growth.

### **El Salvador: Security for Freedom**

**L=35 | Velocity: -2.5/yr** | Stage 6-7

President Bukele trades freedom for security with 91% public approval. 83,000+ imprisoned under state-of-exception. Term limits abolished July 2025. Demonstrates that democratic erosion can be popular when the alternative is perceived as intolerable violence.

## Where the World's Countries Stand

LIBERTY BAND	CLASSIFICATION	COUNT	% OF TOTAL	NOTABLE COUNTRIES
85–100	Consolidated Democracy	18	20%	Finland, Norway, New Zealand, Denmark, Taiwan
70–84	Flawed Democracy	13	14%	France, Poland, South Korea, Japan, Chile
55–69	Hybrid / Eroding	14	15%	India, Mexico, Brazil, Indonesia, South Africa
40–54	Electoral Autocracy	11	12%	Hungary, United States (PTI), Nigeria, Pakistan
20–39	Soft Dictatorship	12	13%	Turkey, Egypt, Morocco, Venezuela, El Salvador
0–19	Closed Autocracy	23	25%	China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, N. Korea

**Population-weighted perspective:** When weighted by population, the picture is even starker. 71% of the world's population lives in countries classified as "Not Free." China and India alone account for 36% of global population, and both are in decline or stagnation on the Liberty axis. Free and democratic countries increasingly represent a minority of humanity.

## The Capable Autocracies Problem

A critical finding of the Political Topology project is the emergence of 39 "Capable Autocracies" — states that combine high human capability ( $HCI \geq 70$ ) with low political freedom ( $L < 60$ ). These states deliver healthcare, education, infrastructure, and material living standards comparable to or exceeding many democracies, but without political liberalization.

The correlation between liberty and human capability has fallen from  $r = 0.79$  (pre-1900) to  $r = 0.57$  (post-1990). This "Great Decoupling" undermines the traditional assumption that economic development inevitably leads to political opening. The autocrat's bargain — material welfare in exchange for political quiescence — now *works* in purely material terms.

## What to Watch: Ten Indicators for 2026–2030

#	INDICATOR	WHAT IT MEANS	CURRENT SIGNAL
1	US institutional resilience	Can courts, military, and Fed maintain independence?	Deteriorating
2	European far-right trajectory	Do AfD, RN, FdI consolidate or moderate?	Uncertain
3	India press freedom	Further suppression or stabilization?	Deteriorating
4	V-Dem 2026 report	How many countries reclassified?	Pending
5	Sovereign yield repricing	Do bond markets begin pricing governance risk?	Asleep
6	AI and information control	Does AI enable more effective censorship/surveillance?	Escalating
7	Climate-driven instability	Does climate stress push fragile states toward chaos?	Rising
8	Taiwan Strait status	Does security competition override democratic norms?	Stable
9	Electoral cycles 2026-27	Germany, Brazil, and others — erosion or recovery?	Pending
10	Dollar reserve status	Does de-dollarization erode the yield premium that masks US risk?	Early signs

## The Bottom Line

**Conclusion:** The global democratic recession is now in its nineteenth year and shows no signs of reversal. The decline is no longer confined to fragile states — it has reached the world's largest and most influential democracies. The emergence of capable autocracies means that the material case for democracy has weakened, even as the moral and civic case remains as strong as ever. Early detection and intervention — before countries cross the event horizon — is the only strategy with a meaningful historical success rate.

The data are clear: once institutional erosion reaches a critical threshold, recovery becomes statistically improbable. The window for action narrows every year. The question is not whether the world is becoming less free — it is — but whether the remaining democracies will recognize the pattern in time to reverse it.

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Political Topology · Cambridge Governance Labs · Data: Freedom House, V-Dem, Fragile States Index, World Bank,  
UNDP, IMF  
Framework and analysis © 2025–2026. This report draws on the Political Topology dataset (91 countries, 225 years,  
1,656 observations).  
For methodology, replication code, and interactive visualizations: [cgl-cambridge-governance-labs-political-  
topology.local](https://cgl-cambridge-governance-labs-political-topology.local)