The United States of America

Basic facts 2007

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<table>
<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>301'580'000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP p.c. (US$)</td>
<td>46'406</td>
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<tr>
<td>Human development rank</td>
<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age of democracy in years (Polity)</td>
<td>198</td>
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<tr>
<td>Type of democracy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Electoral system</td>
<td>Plurality vote (first-past-the-post).</td>
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<td>Party system</td>
<td>Two party system</td>
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The development of the quality of democracy in the United States

The overall quality of democracy

The United States' democracy mostly scored around the average of all 30 countries studied and shows quite some variation over time. While the quality of democracy in the United States continually increased up to 2000, it entered a significant downtrend thereafter. Further, starting in 2005, the United States' democracy quality fell below the countries' average. The reasons for this pattern are discussed in the following sections.
As the lines chart indicates, the graph for the principle *freedom* remains comparatively stable over the period of study and scores well above average in the United States. In fact, compared to the other countries, the USA achieves one of the highest levels of *freedom*. However, a temporary dip in 1992 as well as a minor decline since 2000 can be observed. These developments must be attributed to the functions *individual liberties* and *rule of law*.

A closer look at the first of these two functions, *individual liberties*, reveals that the sharp but short-lived downturn between 1990 and 1994 resulted from increasing incidents of torture and malpractice by police forces. The most prominent example of these is probably the death of African American Rodney King by the hands of five police officers in 1992. Moreover, the extensive riots which took place in Los Angeles and subsequently other cities across the country following this incident are also visible in the Democracy Barometer data. The riots lasted various days and not only left many citizens wounded or dead but also caused a great amount of property damage (Cannon 1999). In 1994, the “United Nations’ Convention Against Torture” was ratified by the U.S. government, and it is perhaps no coincidence that the two indicators measuring the absence of torture and political terror increased in the same year. All of this improved the effective guarantee of *individual liberties* rapidly. Starting in 2001, the country's human rights situation deteriorated again, especially in 2005 and 2006, leading to lower degrees of fulfilment of the function *individual liberties*. This might be explained by the so-called "war on terror" after 9/11. As a consequence of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, various people were arrested during the respective investigations. In this context, reports of the ill-treatment of prisoners, including for example verbal and physical abuse, emerged (AI 2002). Moreover, 61 people died after being shocked by police tasers in 2005, significantly more than in previous years (AI 2006).
Likewise, the decrease in the function rule of law, which mostly remained stable at a very high level until 2001, can probably be seen as a consequence of the American "war on terror". In this case, the decline can be attributed to the indicators measuring the impartiality of the courts, which seem to be negatively affected by the practiced torture of prisoners and especially the failure of the courts to address these incidents as well as of course the continuing extrajudicial detention of hundreds of persons in Guantánamo (AI 2003; 2006). However, the rule of law still scores relatively high which can mainly be explained by the comparatively high degrees of judicial independence and professionalism.

Contrary to the other two functions, no major strides can be found in the function public sphere. With unchanging scores of around 55 scale points, the United States achieves a comparatively high value compared to the rest of the 30 countries. This is mostly due to the country’s unlimited constitutional guarantee of the freedoms of speech, association and the press and a somewhat limited degree of the freedom of assembly (since the constitution includes certain exceptions). Furthermore, the United States have a comparatively well-balanced press system. Hence, although the media market is overwhelmingly privatised, ideological pluralism and diversity characterise the American media landscape (SGI 2009).

Control

During the period under review, the United States’ score of the principle control achieved average value scores; however, at the beginning of the enquiry an upward trend is discernible, in the last years, control followed the opposite path leaving the United States’ control score at approximately the same level as in 1990. These developments seem to be visible in all of the three constitutive functions of this principle as well, particularly so in the case of the competition function.

As for governmental capability, major progress can be observed between 1993 and 1994, which, according to our data, can be explained by a more stable government in 1994 and less intrusion into gov-
ernment affairs by military and religious pressure groups. The comparatively high level of governmental capability was held until 2000, when the function dropped roughly eight scale points in 2001. The same factors are responsible for this setback. Again as a consequence of the "war on terror", terrorism suspects were held in military custody. Thus, the military intruded into domains of the justice system and became more important in politics, a tendency reflected in the data up to 2007 (AI 2003). Furthermore, the 2000 elections led to a cabinet change in 2001 (first Bush administration), which affected the function governmental capability negatively as well. In addition, the U.S. government was increasingly challenged by resistance at the grassroots. Especially the year 2004 saw the highest number of anti-government demonstrations since 1984. These were mostly related to public opposition against the wars in Afghanistan and especially Iraq. For example, on March 29, 2004, one of the largest protest marches in U.S. history took place in New York City. On the occasion of the Republican National Convention’s nomination of George W. Bush as a presidential candidate for the second time, large masses of people voiced their dissatisfaction with the president’s foreign policy (Hauser 2004).

The function competition scored much below average in all 18 years examined. This pattern reflects the logic of the U.S. political system. The rather low performance in terms of competition can be explained by the stable two-party system. On the one hand, this has led – by definition – to a low number of effective parties and a high concentration of seats in parliament. On the other hand, the administrative hurdles to become an electoral competitor have been comparatively high and formal rules for competitiveness virtually non-existent. More precisely, the United States have had a rather low district magnitude and allowed for gerrymandering, i.e. the executive is responsible for drawing the boundaries of electoral districts. Nevertheless, the constantly rising competition score up to 2002 is noteworthy. This can be attributed to the increasing equilibrium of the two political parties in terms of their electoral strength, affecting the vulnerability or competitiveness of elections.

The rather high and stable level of mutual constraints reflects the well-established system of checks and balances in the United States. Especially important has been the possibility of judicial review: all political decisions are subject to review by the United States Supreme Court, whose decisions are respected even when they are controversial (SGI 2009). Moreover, the United States is a highly federal system, which has led to a considerable degree of sub-national revenues and expenditures. Finally, the two party system guarantees a relatively well-developed balance of power between the opposition and government. Only slight variations of this function can be observed over time. The shifts in 1993, 1995, 2003 and 2007 have been caused by changes in the ratio of parliamentary seats held by the opposition and the government after the respective Congressional elections in the previous year.
Compared to the other two principles, the United States’ level of equality seems to have fluctuated most over time. Moreover, the equality performed worse than the cross-national average throughout the 18 years studied. However, while its development ran parallel and close to the mean trend until 2000, we can observe a sharp decline in equality for the U.S. case thereafter. As the graphs for the functions show, this is mainly due to transparency and participation.

The transparency function achieved the highest scores, and they were progressing steadily, though with minor fluctuations, up to 2001. According to our data, the indicators measuring the freedom of the media from legal and political constraints as well as the government’s willingness to communicate as rated by experts are responsible for this upward trend. As of 2002, however, the legal environment of the media has been deteriorating, which might be related to multiple cases of journalists being prosecuted because they refused to disclose their sources to authorities. This practice of requesting confidential information from media representatives on grounds of national security interests seems to have become more common after 9/11, one example being the case of the New York Times journalist Judith Miller who was jailed for several months in 2005 for refusing to disclose the identity of officials who had been leaking confidential information (RSF 2006). In addition, the perceived degrees of corruption and of government secrecy have been increasing since 2002. This could be explained by the withholding of information to the public by government officials before the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and afterwards regarding the question whether Iraq possesses weapons of mass destruction or not.

The graph of the function participation, despite some movements, has been more or less stable on the level of 30 scale points, again until the turn of the century. These minor shifts can be attributed to changes in the effective turnout in parliamentary and presidential elections as well as the share of registered voters since citizens have to register before every election if they want to participate. In some U.S.
states this procedure is quite complicated, which restricts universal suffrage (SGI 2009). After 2000 participation declined dramatically and continuously due to a growing lack of its effective practice. Thus, the representativeness of both electoral turnout and alternative forms of participation in terms of gender, age, education and income, which is of course closely associated with decreasing level of participation in elections, demonstrations and petitions in general, was diminishing.

The function representation, finally, remained most stable over time. Fluctuations were confined to range between the 40 and 50 scale marks. The comparatively low scores of the function might be attributed to the wanting degree of structural possibilities for the inclusion of citizens’ preferences, as measured by the existence of direct democratic instruments on the national level. Of course, if we measured the existence and practice of direct democracy on the state and local level, we would get quite a different picture in this case. Many of the U.S. states, such as California or Oregon, have a strong tradition of direct democracy (C2D). Furthermore, the United States exhibits a rather small number of seats per inhabitant and a relatively high number of constraints regarding passive suffrage. For example, citizens must be at least 25 to be eligible for parliament. Finally, the representation of women in parliament and government has been rather weak in the United States as well. There was, however, some improvement in this last respect, especially between 1997 and 2000, which is also reflected in the graph. Accordingly, at least three women took over from their male predecessors in the Clinton cabinet, most notably Madeleine Albright as the Secretary of State. This level of women representation in the government, however, was only upheld until 2004.
The democracy profile of the United States

The spider charts above illustrate the United States’ democratic profile as defined by the nine functions in comparison to the average across all 30 countries studied in 1990, 2000 and 2007. They clearly mirror the observations made above. Leaving aside participation and maybe governmental capability, the democratic functions remained rather stable over time in the United States. Furthermore, with regard to five of the nine functions, the United States consistently scored above the 30 countries’ mean. The exceptions are competition, representation, participation, and, in the first years, individual liberties. Generally, the principle freedom is very strongly pronounced in the United States. This coincides with the country’s reputation of having a strong libertarian tradition. However, the spiders also imply that the principle control is very important too. As outlined above, the United States are famous for their system of strong checks and balances and – partly due to the presidential system – a relatively high governmental capability. As for the equality principle, considerable shortcomings prevail.