

Teaching American government in a period of democratic backsliding

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Outline

- I. Teaching American government in late 1990s vs today
- II. What is democratic backsliding and why it is important?
- III. How to teach about American democracy during a period of democratic backsliding.
 - I. Putting Democracy first
 - II. American democracy in comparative perspective
 - III. American democracy in historical perspective
 - IV. Teaching American democracy using the “Political Systems” model

American government - 1990s vs Today

- Politics still considered relatively boring and dominated by moderates (low turnout in 1996, 2000 elections).
- Internet is new and considered democratizing.
- Partisan polarization just beginning to influence functioning of government (Gingrich Congress and Clinton Presidency).
- The Cold War is over, democracy won and countries are democratizing all over the world.
- Politics is combative and people are more engaged in partisan fights online. Politics is personal.
- Partisan polarization results in government dysfunction (e.g. debt ceiling showdowns, death of regular order in Congress).
- Democratic backsliding is occurring throughout the world (e.g. Hungary, Venezuela) including the U.S.

Instead of taking US democracy as a given - allow students to evaluate how, when, and where America has been a functioning democracy



The major differences between anti-democratic politics and regular politics

Anti-democratic

1. Condone or support political violence
2. Undermines democratic institutions (such as elections, rule of law, government officials or agencies)
3. Uses government power to silence/punish critics or to rig the rules that favors their party at the expense of the majority.

Regular politics

1. Conflicts over the size and scope of government
2. Fights over government spending
3. Fights over federal taxing

How to teach about American democracy during a period of democratic backsliding

- What is democratic backsliding?

The decline of democratic characteristics in a political system.

What makes a democracy work?

Mutual toleration - accepting rule by the other party. The decline driven by seeing outpartisans as enemies not political opponents, viewing other party as illegitimate and a threat to the country

institutional forbearance - not abusing power or regular order for partisan gains. The decline is evidenced by the frequent use of reconciliation process, debt ceiling chicken, obstructing judicial appointments, and rise of executive orders.

I. Putting democracy first

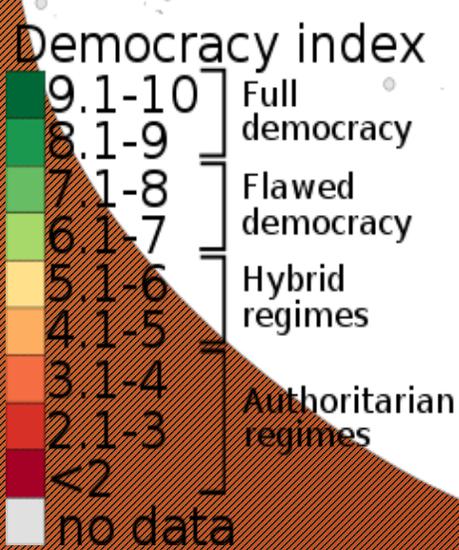
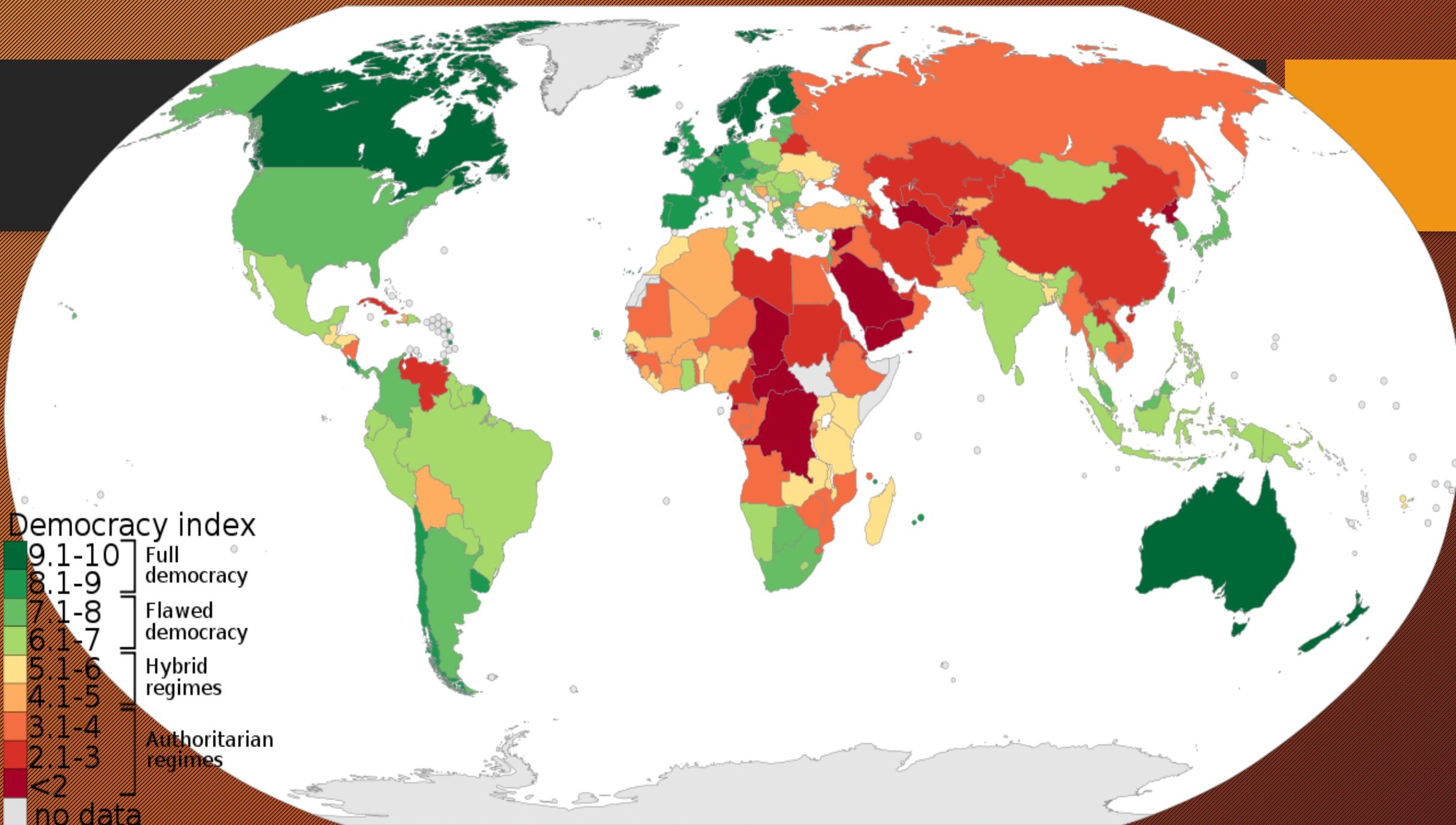
- Change focus from the U.S is a democratic republic to how is the U.S. a democratic republic? Under which conditions?
- Have students identify the characteristics of a modern, functioning democracy on a large sheet of paper that hangs in the classroom.
- After every unit, the students can revisit the characteristics of democracy to add, subtract, and amend.
- Can cover each unit - public opinion, elections, interest groups, etc. as whether it adds to or subtracts from a functioning democracy.

I. Putting democracy first - Examples

- **Argument** - Our Constitution, as written, does not live up to modern democratic standards. The Constitution represents political compromises of that moment in time and resulted in parts of the Constitution that today are obstacles to democracy and majority rule. (Dahl, Robert. 2003. *How Democratic is the American Constitution?*)
- Slavery
- No guarantee of right to vote
- No voting on certain offices and therefore no control by the people
 - Senators chosen by state legislators
 - President chosen by electors
- The Judicial Branch is appointed by the president not elected.
- Checks and balances often frustrates majority rule and gives power to a minority.
- **Book recommendation:** (Achen and Bartels. 2017. *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*)

II. American democracy in comparative perspective

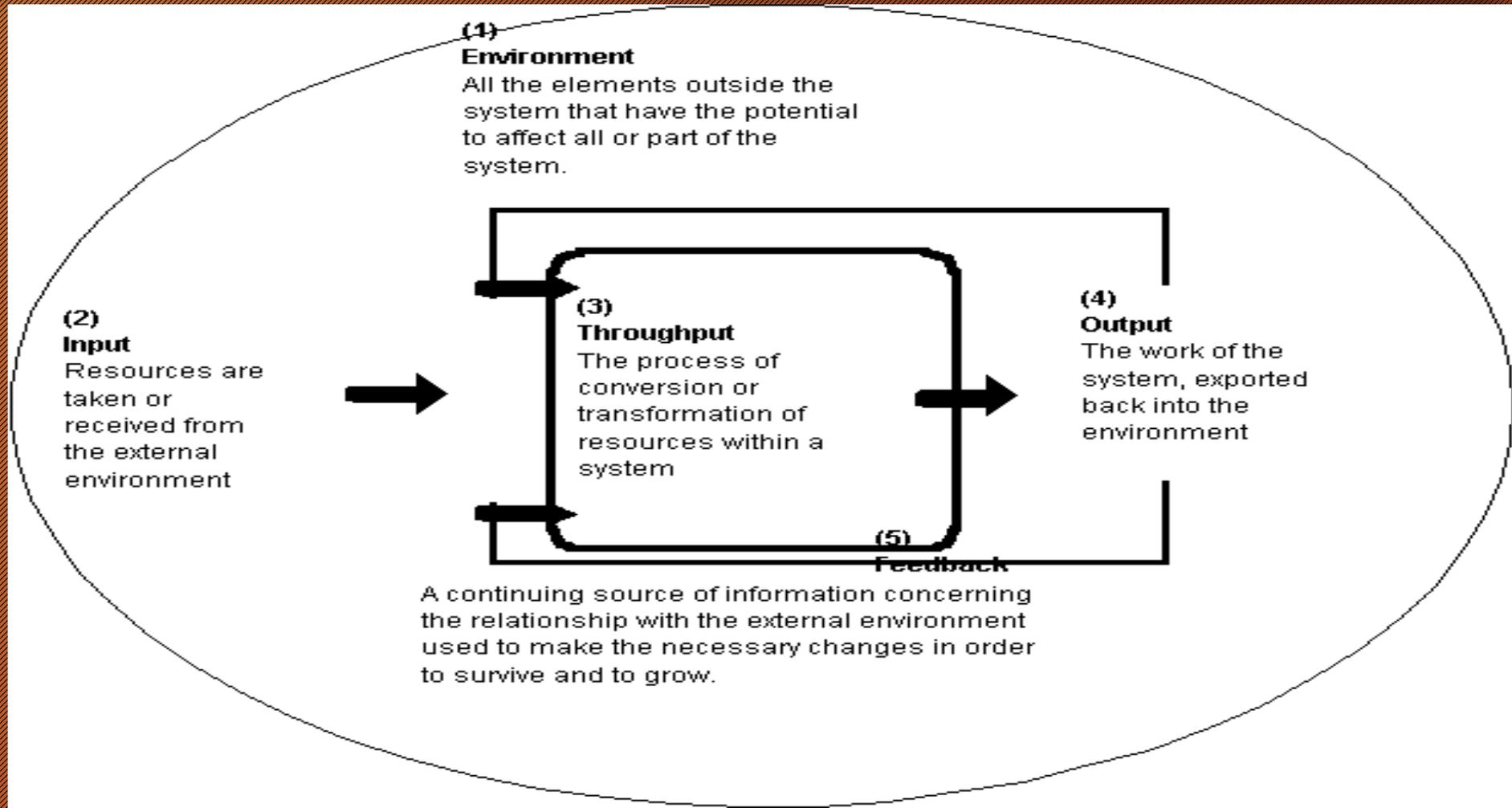
- Democracies are different in form and shape across the world.
- How do the institutions and culture of a nation relate to its' government's stability and functioning? (presidential vs. parliamentary or ethnically homogenous vs diverse)
- Why have democratic norms eroded not only in the United States but in other developed and mature democracies?
- Why have far-right populist candidates become more popular not only in the United States but in the UK, Germany, and France?
- **Book recommendation:** Levitsky and Ziblatt. 2018. *How Democracies Die*.



III. American democracy in historical perspective

- When did America become a full democracy? (universal suffrage, free and fair elections, etc.)
- **Argument:** The U.S. did not become a full democracy until the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965. The Southern U.S. meet the criteria for authoritarianism from the end of reconstruction until the 1960s. (Mickey, Robert. 2015. *Paths Out of Dixie: The Democratization of Authoritarian Enclaves in America's Deep South, 1944-1972.*)
- *Related argument: World War II was a democratizing event in many ways - need for soldiers and labor included the recruitment and inclusion of minority groups in society such as Blacks, women, and native populations. This changed expectations and attitudes of who counts as citizens in America (Klinkner and Smith. 1999).*
- The idea is that democracy is a spectrum (from full to flawed) and a country's position on the spectrum changes over time. Democracy is not static.

IV. Teaching American democracy using the “Political Systems” model



Inputs

- Voters and public opinion
- Interest Groups
- Political Parties
- Campaigns and Elections
- Media

System

- Congress
- Presidency and Bureaucracy
- Court System

Environment

- Inequality
- Capitalism
- Globalism
- Racism
- Sexism

Outputs

- Fiscal Policy
- Social Policy
- Foreign Policy

The Elephant in the Room

- Democracies don't die quickly but more often erode from the inside out.
- Many threats to democracy are nonpartisan such as wealth inequality or bipartisan such as negative partisanship and polarization.
- However, former President Trump and MAGA Republicans represent a unique threat.
 - Some basic premises of democracy are that losers of an election are willing to accept defeat, the rule of law, and show mutual tolerance for the other political party.
 - A majority of Republicans running for office have denied the results of the 2020 election despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary.
- What to do?
 - Focus on the role of Republican elites not average voters
 - Discuss the positive role of Republican officials in stopping the Jan. 6th effort to overturn the election
 - Change the sequencing of units
 - Be honest about the difficulty of the topic and conversation

Thank You