

Americans Remain Committed to Democracy While Growing More Critical of How It Is Performing, Kettering-Gallup Study Finds

The latest Democracy for All Project report finds steady support for democracy as an ideal, worsening views of how it is working and a gap between local optimism and national doubt

WASHINGTON, D.C. — September 23, 2026 — As the United States marks the 250th anniversary of its founding, most Americans remain committed to democracy as an ideal, even as their assessments of how it is performing have worsened over the past year, according to *Frustration Rises, Commitment Endures*, [the third report from the Democracy for All Project](#), a multiyear research initiative by the Charles F. Kettering Foundation in partnership with Gallup. The project is the most extensive annual study of how Americans experience and participate in the democratic system.

The survey of more than 23,000 U.S. adults finds that two-thirds, 66%, continue to call democracy the best form of government, essentially unchanged from 67% a year ago, yet Americans' views of how it is working have darkened. The share who say democracy is doing poorly in the U.S. rose to 56% in 2026 from 51% in 2025, while the share who say it is performing well fell to 19% from 23%. Most of the year's movement traces to Republicans and Republican-leaning independents, whose assessments have shifted toward the more critical views held by Democrats and other independents.

"The survey captures the hopes Americans have for the ideal of democracy," says John Dedrick, executive vice president and chief operating officer at the Kettering Foundation, "but too many are frustrated with their actual experience of democracy."

Americans See a Weaker Democracy Than in the Past and Expect Further Decline

Most Americans believe U.S. democracy is trending in the wrong direction. Sixty percent say democracy was stronger 50 years ago at the nation's bicentennial than it is today, while 21% say it was weaker. Looking toward the tricentennial 50 years from now, more Americans expect democracy to grow weaker (45%) than stronger (31%).

Optimism about the future is unevenly distributed. Americans who are more politically engaged, more involved in their communities, and more positive about how democracy is working today are more hopeful about where it is headed. Among those who express trust in local leaders, 38% expect U.S. democracy to strengthen over the next 50 years.

"As the country marks 250 years, Americans' perceptions of their democracy are sobering," says Justin Lall, Gallup principal. "A majority of Americans say democracy was stronger 50 years ago and more expect it to weaken than strengthen over the next 50 years, yet optimism hasn't disappeared. It's common among people who are engaged in their communities and who see democracy working where they live."

Doubts About the Rule of Law and Executive Power

A majority of Americans, 56%, say the rule of law is weaker than it was 10 years ago, four times the percentage (14%) who say it is stronger. While 78% of Americans say government officials must always follow the law, without exception, just 28% trust that political leaders will be held accountable to the nation's laws and Constitution, down from 32% a year ago. Most of the decline in trust in leadership accountability is driven by shifts among Republicans.

Americans' unease about the balance of power in the U.S. centers on the presidency: 59% say the executive branch has too much power, far more than say the same of the judicial (38%) or legislative (34%) branches. Ratings of poor performance also have risen for systems and institutions meant to uphold the rule of law, including equal treatment under the law (60% vs. 55% in 2025), the division of power among the branches of government (51% vs. 47%) and the criminal justice system (57% vs. 55%). Those living comfortably on their present income are more likely than those finding it very difficult to get by to rate the division of power among the branches of government as working well (26% vs. 10%).

A Tale of Two Democracies: Local Optimism, National Doubt

Americans rate democracy more favorably close to home. About one-third (34%) say democracy is performing well in their own city or town, nearly double the share who say the same about democracy nationally (19%). Only 21% rate their local democracy as doing poorly, compared with 56% who rate the national democracy the same. Americans are also nearly twice as likely to agree officials in their own community are sensitive to the needs of people like them (39%) as to say the same about national leaders (23%).

Local optimism appears to be rooted in community experiences rather than a belief that local government decisions matter more than national ones. Only 24% say decisions made by local leaders affect their daily lives more than those made by national leaders, but positive views of local democracy track closely with satisfaction with local services, trust in one's neighbors and trust in information from local leaders. Notably, Americans who view their local democracy positively also tend to be more positive about democracy nationally, suggesting that strong local institutions may help sustain broader commitment to democracy.

How Americans Would Improve Democracy

Asked in an open-ended question for the one thing that would most improve U.S. democracy, Americans most often point to changing who holds office (17%); reforming elections (13%) to ensure fair elections; giving the public more voice (9%); increasing accountability and ending corruption (9%); and strengthening checks and balances to limit executive power (9%). When it comes to their own participation, Americans say they are most likely to get involved when they feel an important right or freedom is being threatened (27%) or believe their involvement can make a real difference (26%).

Taken together, this year's findings describe a public that remains committed to democracy in principle but is increasingly convinced democracy is falling short in practice and is more hopeful about democracy in local communities than in the nation as a whole.

About the Democracy for All Project

The Democracy for All Project is a multiyear collaboration between Gallup and the Charles F. Kettering Foundation designed to understand how Americans experience democracy and to elevate voices across groups and generations. The September 2026 report is based on a survey of 23,683 U.S. adults conducted April 24 through June 10, 2026, with a maximum margin of sampling error of ± 1 percentage point at the 95% confidence level.

About the Kettering Foundation

The Charles F. Kettering Foundation is a nonpartisan, nonprofit operating foundation dedicated to advancing inclusive democracies. Through partnerships, research and strategic communications, the foundation fosters citizen engagement, promotes government accountability and counters authoritarianism.

About Gallup

Gallup delivers analytics and advice to help leaders and organizations solve their most pressing problems. Combining 90 years of experience with its global reach, Gallup knows more about the attitudes and behaviors of employees, customers, students and citizens than any other organization in the world.