

Celebrating DEMOCRACY



Why We Celebrate Democracy

Democracy is not just a system of government but also a reflection of freedom, equality and collective power.

At its heart, democracy empowers citizens to have a voice in shaping their communities and government, and to choose their own leaders. Democracy allows for participation, protects individual rights and fosters accountability in elected leaders. Celebrating democracy means recognizing these values and renewing our commitment to protecting them.

INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS

One of the most important reasons to celebrate democracy is its emphasis on individual rights. In democratic societies, people have the freedom to express their opinions, practice their religion and live according to their values without fear of persecution. These freedoms are not guaranteed under authoritarian or dictatorial regimes. Democracy provides the legal and political framework for citizens to live freely without unnecessary government control.

PARTICIPATION

Participation is another hallmark of democracy. Through voting, public debate, protest and civic engagement, citizens are not just observers — they are decision-makers. This

involvement ensures that policies reflect the will of the people and not just the interests of a few. According to the United Nations, democracy promotes inclusion, consensus-building and peaceful conflict resolution — tools essential to stable and just societies.

Democracy also holds

power accountable. Regular elections, freedom of the press and independent courts act as checks and balances on government authority. When officials are elected by and answer to the public, corruption and abuse of power are less likely to go unchecked. Transparency and accountability help build trust

between the public and their government.

PRESERVING DEMOCRACY

Celebrating democracy reminds us that it is not self-sustaining. It requires active participation, informed citizens and the protection of civil institutions. Civic holidays like the International Day

of Democracy (celebrated on Sept. 15) and Constitution Day (celebrated on Sept. 17) encourage reflection on democratic values and inspire future generations to uphold them.

The rights we enjoy today were hard-won, and maintaining a free society requires ongoing effort and vigilance.



© ADOBE STOCK

International Day of Democracy

Every year on Sept. 15, countries around the world celebrate the International Day of Democracy, a UN-sanctioned global commemoration first observed in 2008.

The date aligns with the 1997 Universal Declaration on Democracy, adopted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union and endorsed by the UN General Assembly. The day reminds us that democracy requires continuous commitment to principles such as free expression, accountability, equal participation and the rule of law, according to the United Nations.

WHY DEMOCRACY DAY MATTERS

Democracy faces persistent threats: disinformation, declining civic trust, shrinking public space and disproportionate power dynamics. The International Day of Democracy encourages us to reflect on these challenges and reminds us that we must work to preserve democratic ideals and values.

It also emphasizes that democracy extends beyond elections. Between votes, democracy is built from transparency, civic engagement, freedom of the press and strong institutions.

HOW IT IS CELEBRATED GLOBALLY

Schools and educators often mark the day with hands-on learning, such as mock elections, student debates, civic-education activities or classroom votes to practice democratic decision-making.

These interactive exercises help students understand participation and representation in tangible ways.

The Department of State offers a lesson plan for teachers at www.bit.ly/3GTMnB7.

Governments, nongovernmental organizations and other groups host events such as photo competitions, workshops, televised debates, public forums and meetings focused on democratic principles and responsibilities,

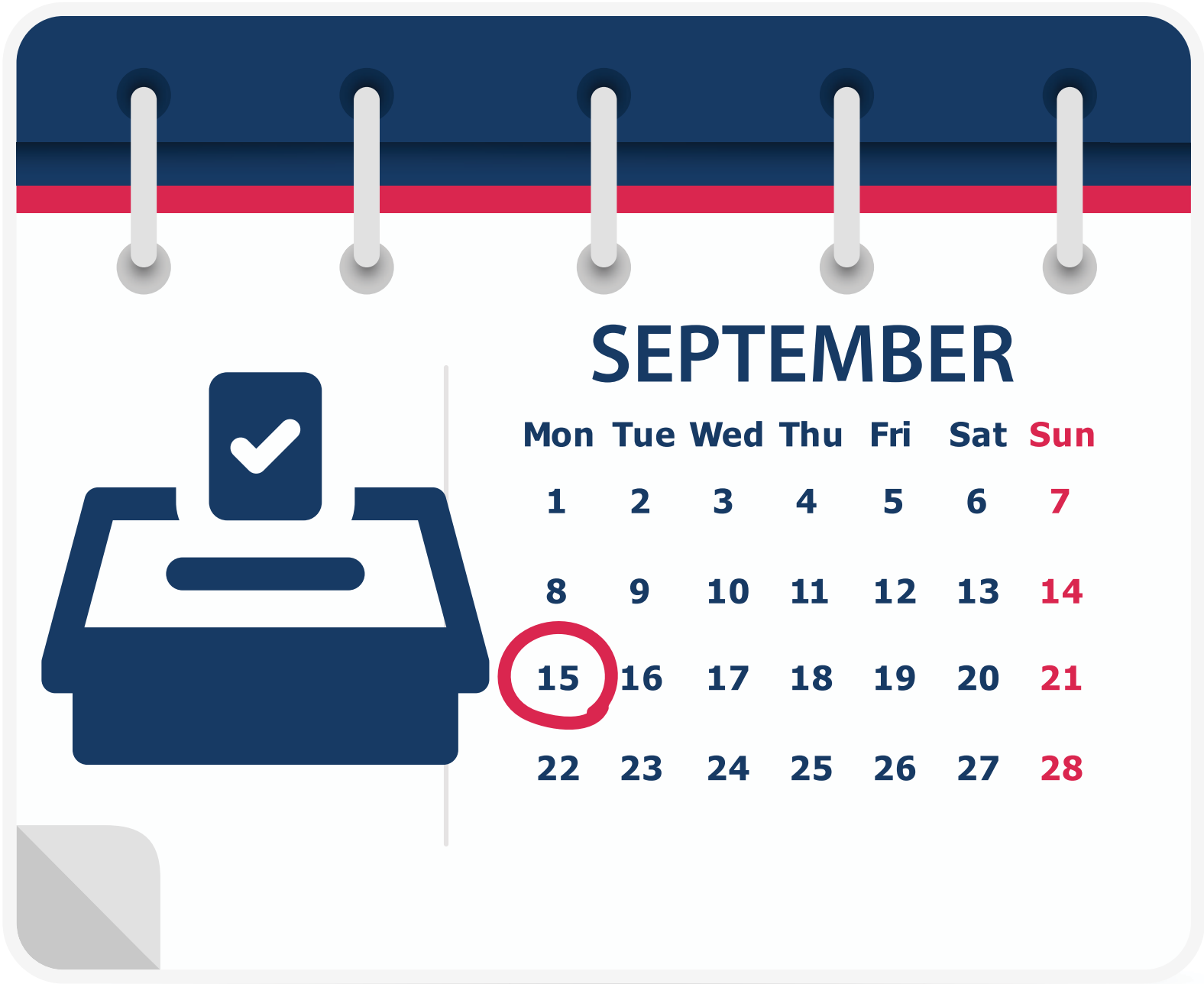
according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

HOW INDIVIDUALS CAN TAKE PART

People can celebrate by hosting local forums or community dialogues on democracy and civic rights; sharing personal stories on social media about what democracy means to them; organizing mock elections or debates, especially in educational

settings; volunteering with organizations that promote voter education, media literacy or government accountability; or writing to elected representatives about protecting democratic principles in policy and practice.

The International Day of Democracy is a way for people across the globe to reaffirm that democracy is more than an ideal — it's a practice that we must maintain to safeguard our freedom.



The Importance of Education

Education is essential to a thriving democracy.

As former President Franklin D. Roosevelt once said, “Democracy cannot succeed unless those who express their choice are prepared to choose wisely. The real safeguard of democracy, therefore, is education.”

A well-educated citizenry can make informed decisions, participate actively in civic life and preserve democratic institutions.

Democracies put high expectations on citizens — to critically analyze information, understand political systems and engage meaningfully in public discourse and governance. Without education, these foundational elements cannot be sustained.

Democracy depends on the principle of popular sovereignty — the idea that power rests with the people. To exercise this power responsibly, citizens must have the knowledge and critical thinking skills to understand their rights and duties. According to UNESCO, education “plays a central role in promoting democracy and the rule of law” by fostering tolerance, intercultural understanding, and respect for human rights.

Civic education prepares people for democratic engagement by teaching how government works, what rights and responsibilities citizens have and how to participate in



© ADOBE STOCK

public affairs. The Brookings Institution found that civic education leads to greater political knowledge, higher voter turnout and stronger community involvement.

Education can combat misinformation and polarization. In an era dominated by social media and fast-moving digital

content, the ability to discern fact from fiction is critical. Media literacy equips students to question sources, verify information and make evidence-based judgments. This is vital to democratic resilience, says the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, noting that

education systems should foster skills for navigating complex, divisive issues in society.

Education helps reduce inequality — another pillar of democratic stability. When access to education is equitable, it levels the playing field and ensures all people can participate in democratic processes.

Lack of access to education can marginalize entire communities and weaken social cohesion.

Education is a critical tool in a democracy. Education creates informed citizens who can sustain democratic values, preserving our freedoms into the future.

Grassroots Organizing

Grassroots organizing plays a vital role in a healthy democracy by empowering everyday people to influence political decisions, advocate for change and hold leaders accountable.

Unlike top-down political campaigns, grassroots movements are driven by local communities that mobilize around shared concerns — from voting rights and environmental justice to economic inequality and civil liberties.

At its core, grassroots organizing is about building collective power. It starts with individuals engaging their neighbors, workplaces and schools to raise awareness and take action. According to the American Civil Liberties Union, grassroots activism has been instrumental in the past several decades for advancing civil rights, reproductive freedom and police reform through community-led efforts and sustained pressure on lawmakers.

Grassroots efforts often fill the gaps left by institutional politics. Marginalized or underrepresented communities use grassroots strategies to elevate their voices when traditional political avenues fail. For example, the civil rights movement of the 1960s,



© ADOBE STOCK

led by local leaders and activists, consisted of boycotts, marches and voter registration drives to challenge segregation and win national reforms. More recently, movements like Black Lives Matter and March for Our Lives have demonstrated the ongoing power of grassroots mobilization in shaping public discourse and influencing policy, according to the Pew Research Center.

Grassroots organizing also

enhances democratic participation by encouraging civic engagement beyond the ballot box. Grassroots organizers might participate in activities such as phone banking, canvassing, town halls, petition gathering, lobbying, public demonstrations and community education events to increase political awareness among the community, educate the public and foster accountability in government. When citizens work together

through grassroots campaigns, they promote transparency and increase responsiveness among elected officials, says Democracy Matters.

Organizing groups of people — at any level of government — shows elected representatives that a groundswell of constituents demand action. The environmental movement, for instance, has seen major victories in the areas of clean energy, conservation and climate policy reform

— from local school boards all the way up to Washington, D.C., thanks to grassroots efforts.

Lasting change often begins with ordinary people coming together to stand for what they believe in. In a democracy, power is meant to reside with the people. Grassroots organizing ensures that this principle becomes practice by giving communities the tools and voice they need to shape their futures.

Free Press and Democracy

“Freedom of the press is the staff of life for any vital democracy.”

These words from 1940 presidential candidate Wendell Willkie remind us that our democracy hinges on the free exchange of ideas and that we must work to protect this freedom.

The founding fathers placed such a high value on the freedom of the press to challenge, oppose and speak truth to government that they enshrined this ideal in our Constitution’s Bill of Rights.

A CHANGING MEDIA LANDSCAPE

At the time of our nation’s founding, the term “press” typically referred to print media produced on a “press” — usually books, newspapers and pamphlets. Today, Americans consume media in more diverse formats: websites, video, music and more. The principle remains the same, however — that media is guaranteed freedom from government interference and censorship.

GOVERNMENT WATCHDOG

By seeking out information, journalists work to ensure transparency in government. They investigate and report on the activities of our government — both its successes and its shortcomings. An informed citizenry is prepared to



© ADOBE STOCK

challenge the government to improve, to prevent abuses of power and to safeguard our shared values.

THREATS TO FREE PRESS WORLDWIDE

Agencies that track press freedoms note increasing threats to such freedoms worldwide. This includes violence against journalists,

increased censorship and the spread of disinformation, often fueled by authoritarianism and political tensions. Strategic lawsuits, known as SLAPPs, are also being used to silence journalists and media outlets.

In 2024, a record 124 journalists and media workers were killed globally — up 22% from 2023’s figure of 99,

according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. The organization reports that in the United States, assaults on journalists grew by over 50% between 2023 and 2024 — from 45 to 68 reported incidents.

DO YOUR PART

There are steps you can take to ensure the free flow of vital information. Support

independent journalism whenever possible, starting with your hometown newspaper. Vote for leaders who promise to protect press freedoms. Practice media literacy by fact-checking information you consume, learning to spot misinformation and deepfakes. You can also contribute to legal defense funds for embattled journalists.

Why Voting Matters

When you walk into a voting booth, you're participating in the cornerstone of democracy.

Voting is the most direct way citizens can influence how their government operates and who leads it. In a democratic society, every vote carries power — power to choose leaders, shape policies and hold public officials accountable.

Without widespread voter participation, the foundation of democracy begins to weaken.

THE WILL OF THE PEOPLE

Voting ensures that elected leaders represent the will of the people. When citizens participate in elections, they help shape decisions on issues that affect their daily lives — such as health care, education, public safety and economic policy. According to the National Democratic Institute, elections give people the opportunity to choose those who will represent their interests and to replace them if they fail to do so.

“OF THE PEOPLE, BY THE PEOPLE, FOR THE PEOPLE”

Participation in voting also strengthens the legitimacy of government. When voter turnout is high, the elected officials are seen as having a



© ADOBE STOCK

true mandate to govern. Conversely, low turnout can result in a government that does not reflect the views of the broader population, potentially leading to unequal policies or disenfranchisement of certain groups. As the Brennan Center for Justice notes, high participation builds trust in the democratic process and strengthens civic engagement.

HONORING OUR FOREBEARS

Voting is a right that has been hard-won by many communities throughout history. From the civil rights movement in the United States to global struggles against colonialism and dictatorship, people have fought — and even died — for the right to vote. Honoring their sacrifices means not taking that right for

granted. As former President Barack Obama said, “There’s no such thing as a vote that doesn’t matter. It all matters.”

SETTING A COURSE

When you vote, you send a message about what you value. It helps set the direction for communities and nations alike. We vote not only on our leaders but also on ballot measures that impact

public services, environmental protections and social programs. Being informed and casting a ballot are powerful acts of civic responsibility.

In a functioning democracy, voting is both a right and a duty. Encouraging greater voter participation — through education, outreach and fair access to the ballot — is essential for democracy to thrive.

Democracy Around the World

The outlook for democracy across the globe is dismal.

Only 6.6% of the world's population lives in full democracies, down sharply from 12.5% a decade ago, while two in five people now live under authoritarian rule, according to The Economist's Democracy Index 2024.

Here's a look at the declining state of democracy worldwide.

DEMOCRACY CATEGORIES

The Index recognizes the following categories of democracies:

- Full democracies, such as Norway, New Zealand, Sweden and Finland.
- Flawed democracies, including the United States, India, France, Brazil and Italy.
- Hybrid regimes, where elections exist but institutions are weak, including Bangladesh, Pakistan and Albania.
- Authoritarian regimes sit at the bottom, with countries like Afghanistan, Myanmar and North Korea scoring extremely low.

BACKSLIDING AND DECLINES

Global freedom declined for the 19th consecutive year in 2024, with 60 countries suffering deteriorations in political rights and civil liberties and just 34 seeing improvements, reports Freedom House. Major drivers of this decline include conflict, violence surrounding elections, and authoritarianism.

DEMOCRACY UNDER STRAIN IN ESTABLISHED STATES

Even long-standing democracies face internal challenges. The United States continues to be a flawed democracy, scored at 7.85, with low ratings for functioning government and political culture. In July 2025,

CIVICUS placed the U.S. on a "narrowed civic space" watchlist, citing "sustained attacks on civic freedoms," including restrictions on protests, press and civil society, deployment of military forces and funding cuts to public broadcasting outlets like PBS and NPR. This put the U.S. in the company of

Turkey, Serbia, El Salvador, Indonesia and Kenya, according to The Guardian.

WHY DEMOCRACY IS DECLINING

With the state of democracy across the world declining, it's natural to look toward the causes.

Key causes include:

- Violence and repression during elections, affecting at least 40% of national polls in 2024, according to The Guardian.

- Loss of trust in institutions like parliaments and political parties, fueling support for authoritarian or populist alternatives.

- Authoritarian leadership spreading globally.

- Youth disillusionment. Studies show a growing preference among younger populations for strongman rule over liberal democracy, driven by economic stagnation and systemic inequality, reports The Guardian.

SIGNS OF PUSHBACK AND HOPE

All is not lost, however. Despite the decline, pockets of democratic resilience persist.

In Ukraine, protests forced reversal of attempts to suppress anti-corruption institutions, reaffirming civil society's role in safeguarding institutional independence, reports The Washington Post. In liberated regimes and transition moments, citizens in Bangladesh and Slovenia saw some democratic gains, though long-term consolidation remains fragile, says The Economist.

The state of democracy is precarious: global scores are near historic lows, democratic backsliding is widespread and even established democracies are facing serious erosion. Yet grassroots activism and reform-oriented institutions offer hope for the future.

