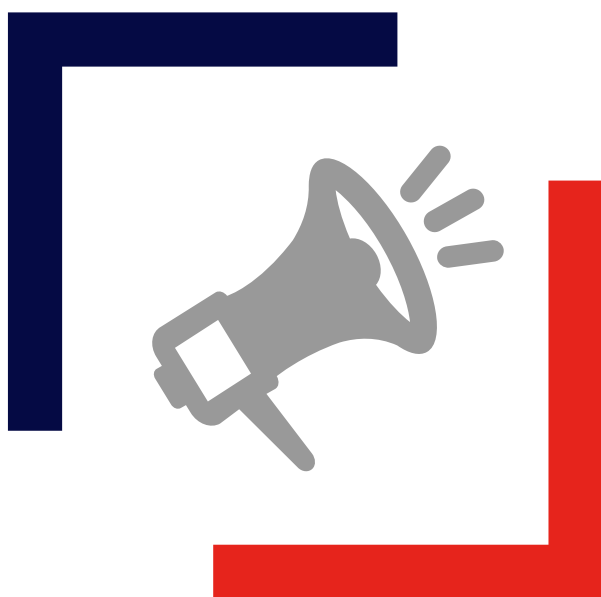


03

Section



Civil Liberties



STATE OF THE NATION



Civil Liberties

Introduction. Civil liberties are central not only to our government, as outlined in the Bill of Rights in the US Constitution, but to what it means to be an American. Our freedoms of speech, press, religion, and assembly allow us to think for ourselves, criticize the government, and practice our faiths. We also have the right to due process and protection from unreasonable search and seizure. These rights protect us from unreasonable interference and imposition by our governments and help define what freedom means in the United States.

Summary of Results. The degree to which our civil liberties are being protected is difficult to measure. For this reason, we include only one measure, focused on freedom of the press. We are above most high-income countries on this measure, though many countries are above us and we are falling behind over time.

Freedom of the Press

Specific measure: Number of press freedom violations, including assaults and arrests of reporters, damage to their equipment, and subpoenas/legal orders for anonymous sources and restricting coverage. (Source: US Press Freedom Tracker).

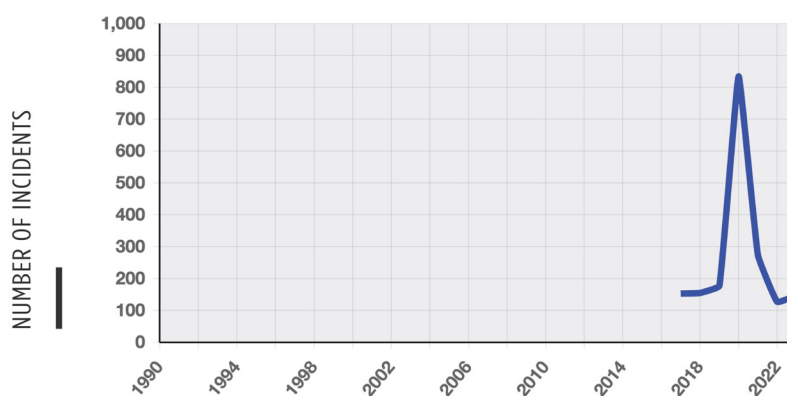
National
Trend% of
countries
the US
outperforms

66%

Intl.
Rank
Trend

Why did we include this measure? The press is seen as so important to holding the government accountable and keeping the public informed that it is sometimes called the “fourth estate,” placing it on par with other “estates,” including the government itself. The specific measure we chose was the only one we could find that consistently and objectively measured press freedom. Other data sources focus on assessments of press freedoms by experts and reporters themselves, but these are more subjective and difficult to interpret than our measure, which focuses on actual, documented events that seem to violate press freedoms. (We did use expert opinion for the international comparisons only because no other type of international source was available.)

Figure 8: Freedom of the Press (National Trend)



How does the US rank globally?

- **Specific Measure:** Survey of experts on each country, assessing media freedom and integrity, including censorship, criticism, representation, self-censorship, bias, and corruption. (Source: Authors' analysis of V-Dem Institute data).
- **Percentage of countries the US outperforms:** 66% (out of 92 countries)
- **International Rank Trend:** ↓

What do the data show? While we can only measure this over a short period of time, a sharp and temporary spike in press freedom violations occurred in 2020. Except for this spike, the US averages a bit fewer than 200 attacks on the press each year. Roughly 15% of these involved detention of journalists by the police and other government law enforcement officials. These are arguably the most egregious violations because, as a civil right, freedom of the press means freedom from government interference and corruption. (Given the short time frame and erratic nature of this measure, we categorize the national trend as “unclear” in the Executive Summary.)

What might explain these patterns? The year 2020 was an unusual year. The COVID pandemic upended our lives and led to controversy over social distancing, vaccines, and other pandemic-related matters; the murder of George Floyd spurred national protests over racial injustice; and the 2020 presidential election saw verbal attacks against the press. The number of attacks on the press was more than four times higher that year compared with 2019 and 2022.



Related Topics: Civil liberties are clearly aligned with the Citizenship and Democracy topic. Freedom of the press is necessary for a well-informed citizenry and as a venue for debate and public discussion.

For more information about data sources and treatments, see the Data Notes section.

Board and Public Support for this Topic and Measures

	<i>Support from Board</i>	<i>Support from Public</i>
<i>Civil Liberties (as topic)</i>	79%	79%
<i>Freedom of the Press</i>	79%	78%

Other Measures Considered: We note, again, that this is a particularly difficult topic to measure. We looked for measures of freedom of speech, religion, and assembly, but we could not find any that seemed credible and consistently measured over time.