

Small States Challenges to democracy

Iceland

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The quality of democracy in the country

Iceland ranks among the highest in political rights and civil liberties and has the highest score in internet freedom in the world.
Source: Freedom House

FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2020

Iceland

94

/100

FREE

<u>Political Rights</u>	37 /40
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	57 /60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

94 /100 ● Free

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. [See the methodology.](#)

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“Subjective” measures of quality of democracy

- Iceland was ranked as number two with a score of 9.58 (out of 10) in the Democracy Index 2019 published by the Economist based on five categories:
 - electoral process and pluralism
 - civil liberties
 - the functioning of government
 - political participation
 - political culture
- Scoring 10 points on electoral process and pluralism as well as political culture, the functioning of government and political participation pull the score down below Norway that has a score of 9.87 total.

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Trust in institutions

- European Value Survey

Confidence in institutions	A great deal/quite a lot	Not very much/none at all
Government	33,6	66,4
Parliament	44,2	55,8
Political Parties	20	80
Press	32,2	67,8
Social Media	23,5	76,5
European Union	47,3	52,7
United Nations	79,1	20,9
Justice System	64,9	35,1
Police	92,7	7,3

Small States Social Cleavages

- Politics in Iceland revolve around a double axis: the traditional left–right axis and an internationalist–isolationist axis structured by the issue of Iceland’s sovereignty in relation to mostly NATO and European cooperation.
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281191788 Populism in Iceland Has the Progressive Party turned populist](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281191788_Populism_in_Iceland_Has_the_Progressive_Party_turned_populist)
- More than 70% of the population live in the capital region that tends to be more open to globalization and international cooperation. Rural voters more prone towards nationalism and isolationism. Although limited class hierarchy, social cleavages based on economic status have increased.

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Public and Political Trust

- Icelanders are and have been among the most trusting citizens in Europe, placing Iceland among the high trusting Nordic countries. Following the financial crisis of 2008, political trust levels in Iceland followed the same path as was observed in other countries greatly affected by the crisis. Public trust in the institutions and actors of political representation plummeted, while the crisis had a limited impact on trust in institutions on the implementation side of the system, such as the civil service, justice system, and police. The results demonstrate a strong and stable impact of evaluations of policy performance and process performance on political trust. Overall, satisfaction with the state of the economy proved to be the strongest determinant of Icelanders' political trust over time. Social trust, demographic characteristics, and social status are all predictors of political trust in Iceland. Partisanship in general remained a stable source of political trust across the study's three time points, while the relative impact of feeling closer to the parties in the coalition government changed significantly following the crash. The post-crisis economic recovery in Iceland has not been sufficient to restore Icelanders' trust in the parliament Althingi to its pre-crash levels, as the political aftermath of the crisis seems to be having a greater and more prolonged impact on public trust in the key institutions of political representation.
- <https://vol.hi.is/rannsoknarverkefni/political-trust-in-iceland-determinants-and-trends-1983-to-2018/>

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Mobilisation of anti-democracy sentiment

- Mobilisation of anti-democracy sentiment is practically non-existent. However, protests against cronyism, inequality and corruption has occurred on numerous occasions.
- The aftermath of the bank collapse in Iceland saw a growing sentiment of distrust towards the establishment and in particular towards politicians. Trust in Alþingi, the Icelandic parliament, evaporated. Protests referred to as the Pots and Pans Revolution broke out in October 2008, the largest protest in Icelandic history, culminating with the resignation of the government in January 2009.
- The 2016 Icelandic anti-government protests were a series of protests against the Icelandic government following the release of the so-called Panama papers that held revelations about the tax affairs of the Prime Minister, the Finance Minister and the Interior Minister. The protests led to the resignation of the Prime Minister.
- Historically, the largest protest prior to the pots and pans were when Iceland decided to join NATO as a founding member in 1949.

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Corruption and inefficiency

- “While Iceland maintains robust anticorruption laws, public officials and major companies have engaged in corrupt behavior. Some officials implicated in corrupt or unsavory behavior often continue to serve in government [...] A report published by the Council of Europe’s Group of States Against Corruption (GRECO) later that year criticized Iceland for inadequate enforcement of conflict-of-interest rules, and urged the government to strengthen rules on accepting third-party gifts.” (Freedom house: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/iceland/freedom-world/2020>)
- Revelations in the Panama papers on off-shore accounts owned by the Prime Minister, the Finance Minister and the Interior Minister brought issues of corruption to the forefront. Traditionally, politicians do not resign in spite of such allegations. However, the Panama papers did lead to the resignation of Sigmundur Davíð Gunnlaugsson, the Prime Minister at the time.

Small States Populism

- Though nationalism has always been strong in Iceland, populist political parties did not emerge as a viable force until after the financial crisis of 2008. Following the crisis a completely renewed leadership took over the country's old agrarian party, the Progressive Party (PP), which was rapidly transformed in a more populist direction. Still the PP is perhaps more firmly nationalist than populist.

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281191788 Populism in Iceland Has the Progressive Party turned populist](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281191788_Populism_in_Iceland_Has_the_Progressive_Party_turned_populist)

- In a split from the Progressive party, former chairman and former Prime Minister, Sigmundur Davíð Guðlaugsson, founded a new party that can be categorized as populist. In the elections in 2017 the party got seven parliamentarians and has since gained two more from the People's party. They are, however, in opposition and often marginalized.

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Extremism and extremist parties

- The Icelandic National Front (Íslenska þjóðfylkingin) is a right-wing extremist party that has a very limited following
 - They have not yet gained enough votes to have an MP
 - They are nationalist, anti-immigration, anti-EU, and an anti-globalization group
- Another group that has gotten some media following is the Nordic Resistant Movement (Norðurvígi) which is part of a larger net of right-wing extremists in the Nordic countries. Just as the Icelandic National Front, they are very marginalized and have an extremely low following.
 - Highly nationalist and anti-immigration
 - Support the formation of a Nordic army

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Democracy and COVID-19

- How did the pandemic affect democratic institutions? (concentration of executive power, misuse of power)
- Icelandic authorities have based all decisions on measures to be taken to fight COVID-19 on scientific advice. The surgeon-general, the state epidemiologist and a commander in civil protection operations, keep the population informed in daily press briefings that practically the whole nation watches. Support for their actions has been overwhelming or above 90%. Some critical voices on harsh measures have, however, materialized and among them two right-wing politicians that believe the restrictive measures are disproportionate to the health risk.
- A few instances of quarantine breach have occurred and fines have been issued to some businesses that have not upheld the restrictive measures set forth by the authorities
- New laws on the possibility of imposing a national curfew are being discussed in Parliament currently but have not been implemented as of November 2020

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Prospects of democracy

- Just as concerns are high globally on the state of democracy in the world, the same concerns exist in Iceland. Increased populism, mis- and disinformation and fakenews have brought a normalization of a new narrative to the forefront.
- Concerns on growing distrust towards political institutions and limited political partisan participation by the younger generation has also materialized.
- However, in general Icelanders trust authorities, not least in times of crises. In a recent survey, more than 95% of the respondents support measures taken by the Icelandic authorities in combatting COVID-19.