



CHICAGO CENTER ON **DEMOCRACY**

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

ANNUAL REPORT 2018-2019



THE UNIVERSITY OF
CHICAGO



OUR MISSION

Our mission at the Chicago Center on Democracy is to use the power of research and discussion to support democracy worldwide. We provide a space for researchers and practitioners to discuss and refine their work on achievements, challenges, and threats to democracy, worldwide. Through events, publications, and public engagement, we share this work with a broader community of citizens, civil society organizations, and policymakers. Our vision is for all people to understand how democracy works and how to strengthen democratic institutions.

Susan Stokes (Faculty Chair of the Chicago Center on Democracy), Jim Robinson (Institute Director of The Pearson Institute for the Study and Resolution of Global Conflicts), and S. Erdem Aytaç (Assistant Professor of Political Science, Koç University) led a discussion about voter and protest behavior at a book launch event in April 2019 for *Why Bother? Rethinking Participation in Elections and Protests*, co-authored by Stokes and Aytaç.



YEAR IN REVIEW

Since the Chicago Center on Democracy's inception in October 2018 through the end of the fiscal year in June 2019, we have worked to build a community in which democracy can be explored in a rigorous, nonpartisan manner.

In our first nine months, the Center has:

- Established the building blocks of our operations, including a mission and vision, staffing, relationships with other organizations, communications platforms, and research focus areas
- Organized more than 20 large- and small-scale events in partnership with organizations within and outside of the University of Chicago
- Established an interdisciplinary Faculty Affiliates Network with 13 associated professors from the Social Sciences and Humanities
- Established an interdisciplinary Graduate Student Affiliates Network with more than 30 doctoral and masters students who work on and study democracy, from programs and schools across the University
- Become the host for Bright Line Watch, a multi-university consortium to monitor the state of democracy in the United States
- Established four key research areas, and assembled teams associated with each
- Received financial support from three funding entities for our research and events
- Brought on two Research Project Leads, three University of Chicago undergraduate data interns, a Pre-Doctoral Fellow, and a number of program and research assistants
- Supported an undergraduate course on Democratic Erosion, a cross-university collaborative course that was taught at the University of Chicago for the first time in spring 2019

OUR HISTORY

The Chicago Center on Democracy existed, in its first incarnation at the University of Chicago, from 1995 to 2005, during the first tenure of Susan Stokes, the center’s faculty chair, at the university. Stokes left the university in 2005, and returned in 2018, when she re-established the CCD with an expanded mission and vision. Whereas in the first period of the center was largely focused on research, the newly established center focuses as well on teaching, building publicly useful tools, organizing public events on key democratic topics, and building a community of individuals committed to strengthening democracy.

The center is located within the Social Sciences Division at the University of Chicago. The division is home to eight academic departments, nine doctoral programs, five masters programs, and 16 academic programs for undergraduate students. We are supported by the shared services of the division, including the business center, communications office, development team, and other services.

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OUR TEAM

The center’s operations are run through a collaborative effort of:

- **The Faculty Chair,** Susan Stokes, who provides the overall direction for the center
- **The Senior Research Associate,** Kevin Kromash, who coordinates the operations of the center, including research, communications, fundraising, and other areas
- **Program Assistants,** who support events and other activities
- **Research Project Leads,** who coordinate research in specific areas
- **Research Assistants,** who support data gathering and analysis in our research

Faculty Affiliates Network

We created a Faculty Affiliates Network, a group of faculty members, mostly at the University of Chicago, who share research interests in topics related to democracy. This group includes faculty in Classics, Law, Political Science, Public Policy, and Sociology. Over the past year, they have met to discuss topics including international courts, the Federalist Papers, and administrative purges after regime change. They meet regularly to discuss and refine ideas on relevant topics.

Graduate Student Affiliates Network

We also created a Graduate Student Affiliates Network, which is a group of more than 30 graduate students at the Masters and PhD levels at the University of Chicago who share research interests in topics related to democracy. They meet to discuss and refine ideas on relevant topics.

OUR RESEARCH

One of the key ways for our center to contribute to the collective effort to strengthen democracy is by conducting research to add new, rigorous, nonpartisan knowledge about how democracy works and how it can work better. During our first year, we have been exploring four key research areas:

- 1. Understanding the rhetorical strategies of populist leaders.** A growing number of elected leaders come into office through democratic means, but then proceed to threaten democratic institutions with democracy’s main tools, without overtly violating the rule of law. The campaign statements of these politicians might represent an early warning that democracy could be threatened under their administrations. This project will create a tool that allows users to assess the types of language that politicians use and the risks to democracy associated with such rhetoric.
- 2. The role of referendums in healthy democracies.** Referendums are often considered a tool of “direct democracy,” providing citizens a direct say in important matters of policy. Yet, many questions about referendums have been little studied: Why do governments initiate referendums? What impact do special interest groups have? Why do societies often seem to have “buyer’s remorse” after the results of referendums? We will create the most extensive, publicly available database of its kind, which will explore key aspects of government-initiated referendums.
- 3. Improving the global measurement of democratic performance.** Most of the existing systematic measures to track the democratic health of nations were undertaken not with the objective of tracking democratic erosion, but to document more dramatic shifts between dictatorship and democracy, or to study the slow emergence of democracy in earlier periods of time, in now-wealthy countries. These indices are extremely complex in construction and use some unrealistic shortcuts in their aggregation methods. Why a country’s score changes from year to year will be difficult for a casual consumer of these indexes to find out. New research puts us in a position to create an improved democratic performance index, by focusing on the most important indicators and using a transparent weighting scheme that takes into account the real-world views of citizens and scholars.
- 4. Bright Line Watch.** The CCD houses Bright Line Watch, a multi-university consortium to monitor democratic practices, their resilience, and potential threats in the United States. This initiative administers a regular survey, first initiated in 2016, to U.S.-based political scientists and a subset of the general American public to measure how perceptions change over time with respect to the most important aspects of democracy and how the United States is performing. The most recent survey wave, in March 2019, also assessed the views of local government officials throughout the country, as well as how the largest political donors view the state of U.S. democracy.



The Chicago Center on Democracy co-organized a conference on campaign finance reform in March 2019. From left, Paula Worthington (Senior Lecturer, Harris School, University of Chicago), Gina Natale (political fundraising consultant), Alisa Kaplan (Policy Director, Reform for Illinois), Daniel Biss (former Illinois State Senator and gubernatorial candidate), and David Bonner (former candidate for Illinois House).

EVENTS

Events are a critical component of the Chicago Center on Democracy's efforts to create and incubate a community of individuals committed to strengthening democracy. We organize events that appeal to a range of people, including students, faculty, staff, and off-campus individuals. Between the Center's launch in October 2018 until June 2019, we organized more than 20 events. These included lectures, gatherings of our faculty and graduate student networks, a conference, and a book launch.

Selected events:

October 2018: Reception and Discussion: Populism and the Erosion of Democracy

For our inaugural event, we held a reception and discussion with Stanford political scientist Anna Grzymala-Busse on how populist individuals and parties have benefited from the shortcomings of mainstream parties, how they gained power in Europe, and the consequences of their governance for the formal and informal institutions of liberal democracy.

March 2019: Democracy and Money: An Evening to Discuss Campaign Finance Reform

Individuals who have served in or run for state-level public office, as well as campaign finance experts, gathered to discuss ideas, policies, and legislative bills to strengthen democracy by leveling the electoral playing field. We co-organized this conference with the Paul Douglas Institute and Reform for Illinois. It was broadcast on local television in the Chicago area.

May 2019: Reflections on Putin and the Media

Scott Gehlbach, Professor of Political Science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison explored the degree to which the Kremlin, led by Vladimir Putin, has consolidated control over the Russian media. He drew comparisons with President Alberto Fujimori's regime in Peru and speculated on the fragility of the Kremlin's control over the media.

June 2019: How Democracies Die: An Interview with Steven Levitsky

Steven Levitsky, Professor of Government at Harvard University, is the co-author of the bestselling 2018 book, *How Democracies Die*. He visited University of Chicago for an interview with Susan Stokes to discuss how democracies thrive and decline, including the implications for U.S. democracy. This event was broadcast on local Chicago-area television.



Susan Stokes, Faculty Chair of the Chicago Center on Democracy, introduces political scientist Anna Grzymala-Busse at the center's inaugural event, on populism and the erosion of democracy, in October 2018.

DEMOCRATIC EROSION COURSE

The Democratic Erosion course is a cross-university collaborative course. The convenors' overarching goal is to help students evaluate the risks to democracy in the United States and around the world. Created in 2016 at Brown University, the course is now being taught at more than 40 institutions, internationally. In Spring Quarter, 2019, the Chicago Center on Democracy's Susan Stokes brought the course to the University of Chicago for the first time.

The Democratic Erosion course at the University of Chicago demonstrated some of the ways in which activities beyond the typical course features can be used to enrich students' educational experiences and opportunities:

- The collaborative nature of the course allowed students access to materials and relationships from some 40 other universities.
- The University of Chicago's College Curricular Innovation Fund provided funding to invite many guest speakers, who provided commentary on the course readings.
- The Chicago Center on Democracy organized lunchtime conversations and other opportunities for students to interact with the guest speakers.
- The course requirements included blog posts about democratic erosion. This introduced a new type of writing skill, which is quite different from academic writing. Some of the students submitted their blog posts to a national competition run by the Social Science Research Council (SSRC). Out of the four winners that the SSRC selected, two were University of Chicago students enrolled in our Democratic Erosion course. The SSRC staff are working with the winning students to refine their posts over the summer. The SSRC will publish the posts in the fall 2019.
- The students were encouraged to attend public meetings and events off campus, and were required to write a case study about a country that had experienced an incident of democratic erosion.



Participants at the center's event on "The Outlook for Democracy in Brazil." The gathering took place on October 25, 2018: three days before an openly authoritarian candidate won the presidency in Brazil, the world's fourth-largest democracy.



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