

CHICAGO CENTER ON DEMOCRACY

2022-23 ANNUAL REPORT



CHICAGO CENTER ON
DEMOCRACY
THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

The Chicago Center on Democracy works to strengthen democracy through research, discussion, and community-building. We are a hub for students, faculty members, nonprofits, and others who are interested in working to support democracy through rigorous, nonpartisan research and other activities.



July 2023: Students from our 2023 multi-university democratic erosion internship gathered in Chicago for an intensive training session. The students in this internship come from seven universities: American University, Brown University, University of Chicago, Dartmouth College, University of Houston, Morehouse College, and Spelman College.

Highlights

RESEARCH

We advanced a number of key research activities, including launching our Democracy Tools site, administering new research surveys, and adding to Bright Line Watch's cumulative research on U.S. democracy.

EVENTS

Our events this year were of various types and scales—such as invited speakers, book talks, conferences, and research discussions.

CURRICULUM

The Democracy Core Sequence expanded to four sections, and we launched a new Minor in Democracy Studies.

COLLABORATION

We collaborated with 25 internal and external entities on events, research, and other activities.

MEDIA

Interviews, op-eds, and quotes appeared in media outlets such as *Bloomberg*, *The Boston Globe*, *CNN*, *NBC News*, and *Vanity Fair*.



March 2023: The Chicago Center on Democracy and the Smart Museum of Art collaborated for a tour of the museum's "Not All Realisms: Photography, Africa, and the Long 1960s" exhibit, which addressed photography in the context of Africa's long 1960s—amid resistance, revolution, new nationalist and transnational movements, and the stuff of daily life therein.



Research

The Chicago Center on Democracy conducts research in a number of areas. Our team—which includes faculty, staff, graduate students, undergraduate research assistants, and collaborators—run these projects collaboratively.





Democratic Performance Index

An index of global performance on democracy. Study the quality of democracy in any country in any year.

Explore →



Political Rhetoric Analysis

Study campaign speeches to analyze rhetorical strategies, compare similarities across politicians, and detect risks of democratic erosion.

Explore →



Referendums

A collection of data about national-level referendums over the past half century.

Explore →

Launching the Democracy Tools Site

In September 2022, we launched our Democracy Tools site, which was the culmination of several years of research by dozens of individuals on our team, including graduate students, research assistants, contractors, and advisors.

Funded by the United Nations Democracy Fund, this website contains tools to visually explore aspects of democracy around the globe. The tools in this site are intended to be accessible to anyone with an interest in democracy, including journalists, civil society representatives, academics, or concerned citizens. The tools cover three areas of democratic functioning:

1. Tracking global democratic performance
2. Analyzing the rhetorical strategies of politicians, and
3. Understanding the role of referendums in healthy democracies.

Using surveys to understand autocratic rhetoric

Over the past year, we have administered a number of surveys in the United States and Mexico to understand the effects of different types of political rhetoric on citizens' emotional states, views on government and polarization, and willingness to undermine democratic rules. This research is ongoing.



Diego Rivera's "History of Mexico" mural at the National Palace in Mexico City, the seat of the country's federal government.

Tracking U.S. democratic performance with Bright Line Watch

Bright Line Watch is a cross-university collaboration to monitor democratic practices, their resilience, and potential threats in the United States. Bright Line Watch's flagstone activity is a set of regular surveys of political science experts and the general American public that provide a fine-grained picture of the performance of U.S. democracy over time. Since early 2017, prior to establishing its home at the center, Bright Line Watch's surveys have become an indispensable tool for monitoring the state of U.S. democratic performance, and have been featured in The New York Times, The New Yorker, and the Washington Post, among other news outlets. We continue to run the core Bright Line Watch surveys, and to add new innovative survey techniques with each survey wave.

CONTINUING THE CORE SURVEYS

During AY2022-23, Bright Line Watch fielded two waves of surveys.

- The first, in October 2022 (the 17th in the initiative's history), compared Republican and Democratic confidence in American elections, reported findings about views on the importance of concession statements, measured views on a 2024 Trump candidacy, among many other aspects.
- The second, in November 2022 (18th BLW survey), served as a comparison to the previous survey, as they were fielded immediately before and after the midterm elections, respectively. It found, among other aspects, that public confidence in elections increased after the midterms, and that views on the state of U.S. democracy became more optimistic.

ADDITIONAL RESEARCH WORKSTREAMS

Throughout this year, Bright Line Watch's multi-university team of faculty and student researchers also continued working on two parallel research tracks:

1. Scraping the Twitter and Facebook posts of state legislators and cataloguing their views on the "Big Lie" (i.e. that there was election fraud in 2020).
2. Investigating the timing and narrative of concession statements by 2018 and 2020 U.S. Senate and House candidates.



Events



The Chicago Center on Democracy organizes events of various types and scales—such as invited speakers, book talks, conferences, and research discussions. These provide our community members spaces to learn, discuss, and share views on topics in democracy.

February 2023: Professor Steven Pincus of the University of Chicago History Department delivers a lecture on "Revolution" as part of the Democracy Curriculum initiative's quarterly lecture series.

Organizing events on a wide range of topics

Democracy is a broad topic. It has many facets and can be approached from a variety of disciplines—political science, sociology, classics, history, and others. We organize events on many topics to meet the interest of the diverse community of students, scholars, and others at the University of Chicago.

Over the past year, our events have focused on topics including democratic backsliding, democratic art, inequality, free speech, and careers in democracy, among others.



A sample of 2022-23 event flyers



November 2022: Professor John McCormick of the University of Chicago's Political Science Department delivers a lecture entitled "Opening the People's Eyes (At Least Partially): Machiavelli on Civic versus Princely Leadership," as part of the Democracy Curriculum initiative's quarterly lecture series. The lecture and following commentaries examined two of Machiavelli's works to shed light on today's populist vs. democratic worldviews.



not all realisms
photography, Africa,
and the long 1960s

March 2023: Leslie Wilson, curator of the Smart Museum of Art's "Not All Realisms: Photography, Africa, and the Long 1960s" exhibit, provides a tour co-organized by the Democracy Curriculum initiative. The exhibit focused on Ghana, Mali, and South Africa, featuring photographic prints, reprints, books, magazines, posters, and other material means through which photography's relationships to real people and events were articulated, produced, and circulated.



September 2022: Esmeralda Cerritos-Martinez, Program Assistant at the Chicago Center on Democracy, staffs a table for the center at the 2022 Academic Opportunities Fair. Students interested in democracy were able to learn about opportunities to get involved with the center.



*April 2023: The University of Chicago Center for Effective Government, the Chicago Center on Democracy, and Seminary Co-op Bookstores presented another installment of 'The Democracy Series'— a joint initiative of public events featuring dialogue between book authors and experts on issues related to the state of democracy in the U.S. and abroad. Chris Tausanovitch, Associate Professor of Political Science, and Lynn Vavreck, Marvin Hoffenberg Professor of American Politics and Public Policy at the University of California Los Angeles, discussed their book *The Bitter End: The 2020 Presidential Campaign and the Challenge to American Democracy* with University of Chicago Political Science Professor Will Howell.*

Convening scholars and practitioners in Paris

The Chicago Center on Democracy collaborated with the University of Chicago's Center for Effective Government and the University's Center in Paris to convene a group of scholars and practitioners in Paris for the Cross-Atlantic Democracy Conference: a set of roundtables on vulnerabilities to democracy in February 2023.

Those present hailed from nine countries across Europe and North America, coming together at the Center in Paris to discuss topics including "Democracy in International Politics," "The War of Ideas in Ukraine and Beyond," and "Grassroots Activism."



February 2023: Participants in the Cross-Atlantic Democracy Conference enjoying a break between roundtable conversations.




Our aim with Cross-Atlantic Democracy Conference was to lay the groundwork for a longer-term initiative to gather scholars and practitioners with deep knowledge about the vulnerabilities of democracy and the political forces that, by turn, reinforce and undermine its expansion.



Convening faculty across disciplines


The Chicago Center on Democracy's Faculty Affiliates Network is a group of faculty members who share research interests in topics related to democracy, from various disciplines. They meet regularly to discuss and refine ideas on relevant topics.

In 2022-23, they convened to discuss research on topics including evaluating effectiveness of institutions, rhetorical attacks on democracy, state capacity in 18th century Spanish colonies, and conscription in Ukraine.



Democracy Curriculum

The Democracy Curriculum program promotes teaching, research, and extracurricular activities related to democracy at the undergraduate level at the University of Chicago. It is a collaboration between the Chicago Center on Democracy and the Social Sciences Collegiate Division.



Establishing a curriculum centered around democracy

For the past decades, there have been no curricular structures at the University of Chicago to pursue sustained, systematic inquiry into democracy as a distinctive modality of social life, political power, and governance.

THE DEMOCRACY CORE

In fall 2021, we took the first step in creating a democracy-centered curriculum by offering a new three-course Social Sciences sequence within UChicago's Core Curriculum, entitled “Democracy: Equality, Liberty, and the Dilemmas of Self- Government.”

In the AY2022-23, we completed the second year of this Core sequence, expanding it to four sections, each with 15-20 students. Students also have access to a writing program that offers customized training integrated into their democracy Core classes.

MINOR IN DEMOCRACY STUDIES

This year, we launched a new Minor in Democracy Studies program. This program is one of only a handful of democracy-focused minor programs that we are aware of at U.S. universities. The minor provides students essential knowledge, insights, methods, and critical perspectives necessary to understand the world around us and the historical developments that have placed it in such a precarious state.

As part of this minor, we launched a new a new required course, “Democracy and Its Critics,” in which students investigate the strengths and weaknesses of democracy as a political regime and a form of social organization.

STUDENT RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

One of the key goals of the Democracy Curriculum is to expand democracy-focused research opportunities at UChicago. To reach this goal, we have funded undergraduate research assistants to work with faculty on research projects that relate to some aspect of democracy. Over the past year, students researched topics including conspiracy in ancient Greece and how democracy can address economic inequality.

A NEW STUDENT ADVISORY BOARD

The Chicago Center on Democracy created a Student Advisory Board this year, composed of undergraduate students interested in democracy, in an effort to build a student community that organize activities on democracy-related issues, and providing students with a space to connect with peers.

In AY2022-23 we established the group and began laying the groundwork for a more active entity in AY2023-24. Our intention is that each student on the board serves as an organizer (or co-organizer) of at least one activity per academic year. These could include pop-up learning sessions, movie nights, guest lectures, etc.

STUDENT-CENTERED EVENTS

As part of the Democracy Curriculum, we strive to organize events that apply democratic questions to the lived experience of students.



May 2023: Susan Stokes, Professor of Political Science and Faculty Director of the Chicago Center on Democracy, delivering a lecture on "Trash-Talking Democracy" as part of the Democracy Curriculum's quarterly series.



A multi-university internship

In summer 2023, as part of the Democracy Curriculum, we began the fourth iteration of our multi-university program centered around the Democratic Erosion Event Dataset (DEED). What began in 2019 as a collaboration between our center and the Democratic Erosion consortium based at Brown University, has expanded this year to include seven universities: American University, Brown University, University of Chicago, Dartmouth College, University of Houston, Morehouse College, and Spelman College.

The students work as a collaborative cohort on a variety of projects, including expanding the data included in the DEED, building out a new Autocratic Consolidation Events Dataset, outlining a dataset of subnational incidents of democratic erosion in the United States, drafting reports, and conducting research on other topics.

Engaging the media on issues of democracy

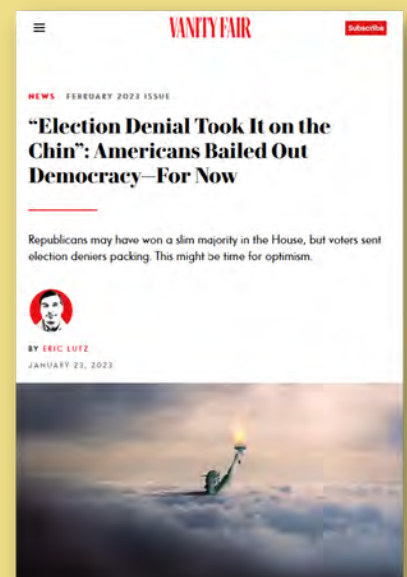
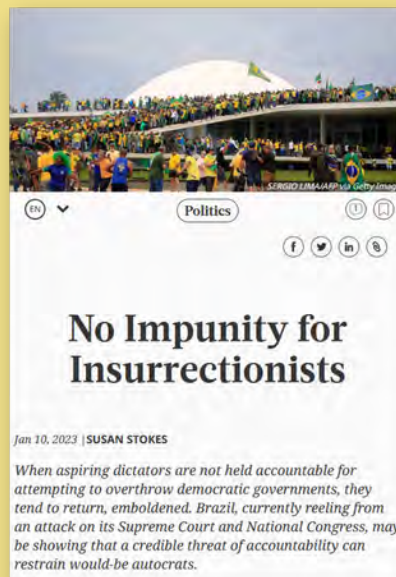
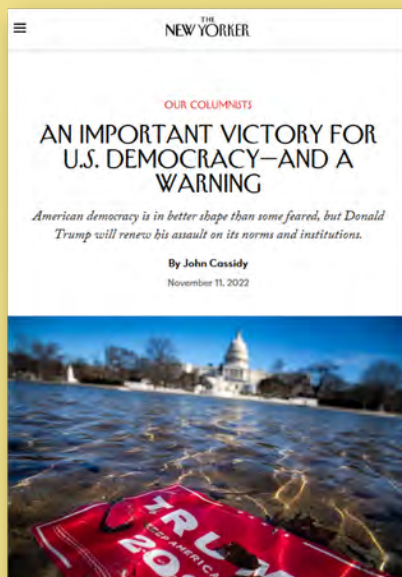
Receiving coverage in the mainstream media is one way for our center and associated individuals to expand our reach and impact. Over the past year, our team has contributed to public dialogue about democracy in many outlets.

Our Faculty Director, Susan Stokes, was interviewed and published opinions about a number of topics. A selection includes:

- [“Why the US ‘does not get to assume that it lasts forever’”](#), *CNN* (July 4, 2023)
- [“Neutralizing Trump’s Big Lies,”](#) *Project Syndicate* (June 27, 2023)
- [“‘Election Denial Took It on the Chin’: Americans Bailed Out Democracy—For Now,”](#) *Vanity Fair* (January 23, 2023)
- [“Assessing the Health of Democracy,”](#) *WNYC* (January 2, 2023)
- [“Reassessing US democracy: Stronger, but not out of the woods,”](#) *Christian Science Monitor* (November 30, 2022)

Bright Line Watch's research was also covered in many media pieces, such as:

- [“A national divorce would solve nothing,”](#) *The Boston Globe* (March 3, 2023)
- [“How 2022 Was A Win For Democracy,”](#) *FiveThirtyEight* (December 29, 2022)
- [“Truth Is Reasserting Itself Over Trump's Lies,”](#) *Bloomberg* (December 18, 2022)
- [“An Important Victory for U.S. Democracy—and a Warning,”](#) *The New Yorker* (November 11, 2022)
- [“Most Republican candidates endorse the ‘big lie’ — even when voters don’t,”](#) *The Washington Post* (October 12, 2022)



2022-23 Collaborators

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO:

- Career Advancement
- The Center for East European and Russian/Eurasian Studies
- Center for Effective Government
- Center for Latin American Studies
- Center in Paris
- David Rubenstein Forum
- Department of History
- Latin American Matters, Harris School
- Law, Letters, and Society
- Neubauer Collegium for Culture & Society
- Smart Museum of Art
- Social Sciences Collegiate Division

EXTERNAL ENTITIES:

- American University
- Brown University
- Chicago History Museum
- Dartmouth College
- Democratic Erosion Consortium
- EPI-interactive
- Morehouse College
- University of Houston
- University of Rochester
- Seminary Co-op Bookstores
- Spelman College
- Vanderbilt University's Latin American Public Opinion Project
- Council on Latin American & Iberian Studies, Yale University

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