



CHICAGO CENTER ON DEMOCRACY

2024 ANNUAL REPORT

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Albert Pick Hall for International Studies, where the Chicago Center on Democracy established our new office in 2023.

2023-24 HIGHLIGHTS

The Chicago Center on Democracy had a busy year. We greatly expanded our programming, developed our research projects, built out our undergraduate offerings, and engaged with many individuals and organizations across the university.

This year we expanded our team by hiring a new Outreach and Events Coordinator, and moved into new office space in Pick Hall, which places us in close proximity to the Department of Political Science and other centers such as the Center for International Social Science Research and the Center for Latin American Studies.

Additionally, we established a presence on several new social media platforms, and continued to expand our public outreach, with mentions in media outlets such as *CNN*, *ABC News*, *The Atlantic*, and *The New Yorker*.

70

We organized or sponsored more than 70 events and activities.

20

We worked with more than 20 collaborators.

4

The Democracy Core Sequence had four sections this year (each with about 18 students), as well as our Minor in Democracy Studies.

3

We have three affiliated networks at the university: Faculty Affiliates Network, Graduate Student Affiliates, and undergraduate Student Advisory Board.



Professor Clifford Ando delivering a lecture on “Law is A Command of the People: Legal Legitimacy and the Form of the State,” as part of the quarterly lecture series associated with the Democracy Core, February 6, 2024.

PROGRAMMING

EXPANDING OUR PROGRAMMATIC OFFERINGS

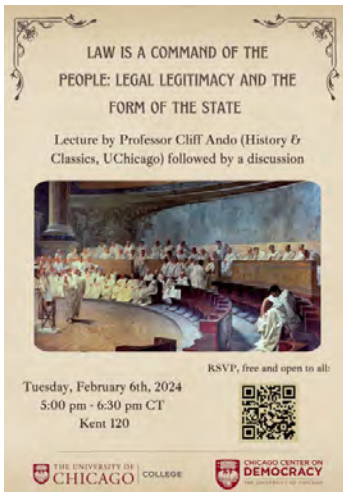
The Chicago Center on Democracy greatly expanded our organization and sponsorship of public events and activities this year. We were involved with more than 70 activities, which included a broad variety of events, a considerable expansion from previous years.

The Chicago Center on Democracy and the Law, Letters, and Society program invited students to chat over lunch with New York Times opinion columnist David Brooks (May 15, 2024)



EXAMPLES OF OUR EVENTS IN 2023-24

Our events this year took many forms, including invited speakers, panels, student gatherings, research workshops, bus tours, and film screenings.



EXAMPLES OF OUR EVENTS IN 2023-24



DEMOCRACY AND CONSPIRACY: WHAT CONSPIRATORIAL THINKING IN CLASSICAL ATHENS REVEALS ABOUT DEMOCRACY (OCTOBER 26, 2023)

Assistant Professor Demetra Kasimis delivered our Autumn Quarter 2023 Democracy Core Lecture, which exposed the frequent, but often overlooked, engagement with conspiratorial thinking, secret plots, and subversive hidden networks in the prose and poetry of Athenian democracy to demonstrate how thinkers like Plato saw an entanglement between the ideas and practices of conspiracy and democracy.



ASK ME ANYTHING ABOUT THE BILL OF RIGHTS (NOVEMBER 8, 2023)

While many of us know the basics of the Bill of Rights, it is important for all citizens to understand this bedrock set of amendments. UChicago Law Professors Aziz Huq and William Baude answered students' questions about the Bill of Rights during this lunchtime Q&A.



WHY IS DEMOCRACY IMPORTANT? (APRIL 8, 2024)

This panel discussion probed the fundamental question: Why is democracy important? The panel delved into a comparative analysis between democracy and other forms of government such as the authoritarian model epitomized by China. The panelists included Iza Ding (Political Science, Northwestern University), Marco Garrido (Sociology, UChicago), Zhaotian Luo (Political Science, UChicago), and Susan Stokes (Political Science, UChicago).



"I'M SPEAKING": A BUS TOUR OF WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE SITES IN CHICAGO (APRIL 21, 2024)

We brought together a tour of 30 students, faculty and community members for a bus tour around Chicago's most prominent women's suffrage sites, where women gathered, organized, and fought for social change, as well as more recent sites, such as the "I'm Speaking" mural by Dorian Sylvain featuring Kamala Harris's famous words. The tour was led by Fiona Maxwell, a PhD Candidate in the History Department.

SPOTLIGHT ON OUR NETWORKS

The Chicago Center on Democracy convenes three networks at the University of Chicago:



Student Advisory Board

A group of undergraduate students who meet regularly to plan activities they'd like to see on campus related to democracy.

Seen here is a study break they organized in May 2024, in which they tested a student-designed voting simulation program to compare alternative voting systems with the standard first-past-the-post system. They decided that the question they'll vote on was: What is the best type of ice cream topping? Of course, they also got a chance to enjoy some of those toppings as part of the gathering!



Faculty Affiliates Network

This is a set of faculty members who convene to discuss one another's research related to democracy. They share insights from across disciplines, including Classics, History, Law, Political Science, Public Policy, and Sociology.



Graduate Student Affiliates Network

This network is parallel to our faculty network, though at the graduate level, including doctoral and master's students. They are enrolled in programs such as Computational Social Sciences, the Harris School of Public Policy, International Relations, Social Sciences, and various doctoral programs.





Elizabeth Shen (Coordinator, Social Sciences Collegiate Division and Olivia Rae Okun-Dubitsky (Democracy Studies Student Liaison) speak with students at the Academic Opportunities Fair (September 27, 2023)

CURRICULUM



ABOUT THE DEMOCRACY CURRICULUM

The mission of the Democracy Curriculum program is to promote teaching, research, and extracurricular activities related to democracy at the undergraduate level at the University of Chicago.

We run a three-course Core sequence, a Minor in Democracy Studies, a soon-to-be launched study abroad program, and a set of extracurricular activities.

We work to weave connections between the formal curricular offerings and extracurricular offerings. For example, we organize events that are relevant to certain courses, organizing a quarterly lecture series connected to the Core, and creating research assistant positions for undergraduate students.

SOCIAL SCIENCES CORE SEQUENCE:

DEMOCRACY: EQUALITY, LIBERTY, AND THE DILEMMAS OF SELF-GOVERNMENT

In collaboration with the Social Sciences Collegiate Division, we organize the democracy-themed Social Sciences Core Sequence, called Democracy: Equality, Liberty, and the Dilemmas of Self-Government. This year, four sections of the Core were taught, each of which had around 18 students



Democracy in London

In addition, this year we developed our first study abroad program, which will be the Democracy Core in London, in Winter Quarter 2025.

This course will be similar to the Democracy Core offered on the main campus, and will have an added independent study course focused on archival research. Students will, additionally, have access to the enormous trove of resources and activities in London relevant to the study of democracy, from the holdings of the British Museum and British Library to the Prime Minister's Questions to ancient Roman sites such as the Basilica and Forum.

MINOR IN DEMOCRACY STUDIES

Students enrolled in the Minor in Democracy Studies program are required to take the “Democracy and Its Critics” course. This course is offered annually, and is co-taught by two professors from different disciplines, who rotate each year. The course introduces students to the study of self-government; they explore the strengths and weaknesses of democracy as both a form of government and a form of social/cultural organization.

In addition to the Democracy and Its Critics course, students in the Democracy Studies minor take four elective courses, drawn from across many disciplines. Some of the courses approved for AY2023-24:

- ENGL 17950. The Declaration of Independence (English Language and Literature)
- GRMN 25823. Fascism (Germanic Studies)
- HIST 26409. Revolution, Dictatorship, & Violence in Modern Latin America (History)
- HMRT 21005. Militant Democracy and the Preventative State (Human Rights)
- KNOW 32204. Science, Governance, and the Crisis of Liberalism (Institute on the Formation of Knowledge)
- PBPL 28765. The Politics of Authoritarian Regimes (Public Policy)
- PLSC 24810. Politics of the US Congress (Political Science)
- RDIN 22112. African American Political Thought: Democracy's Reconstruction (Race, Diaspora, and Indigeneity)
- RLST 25561. Justice at the Margins: Religion, Race, and Resistance (Religious Studies)



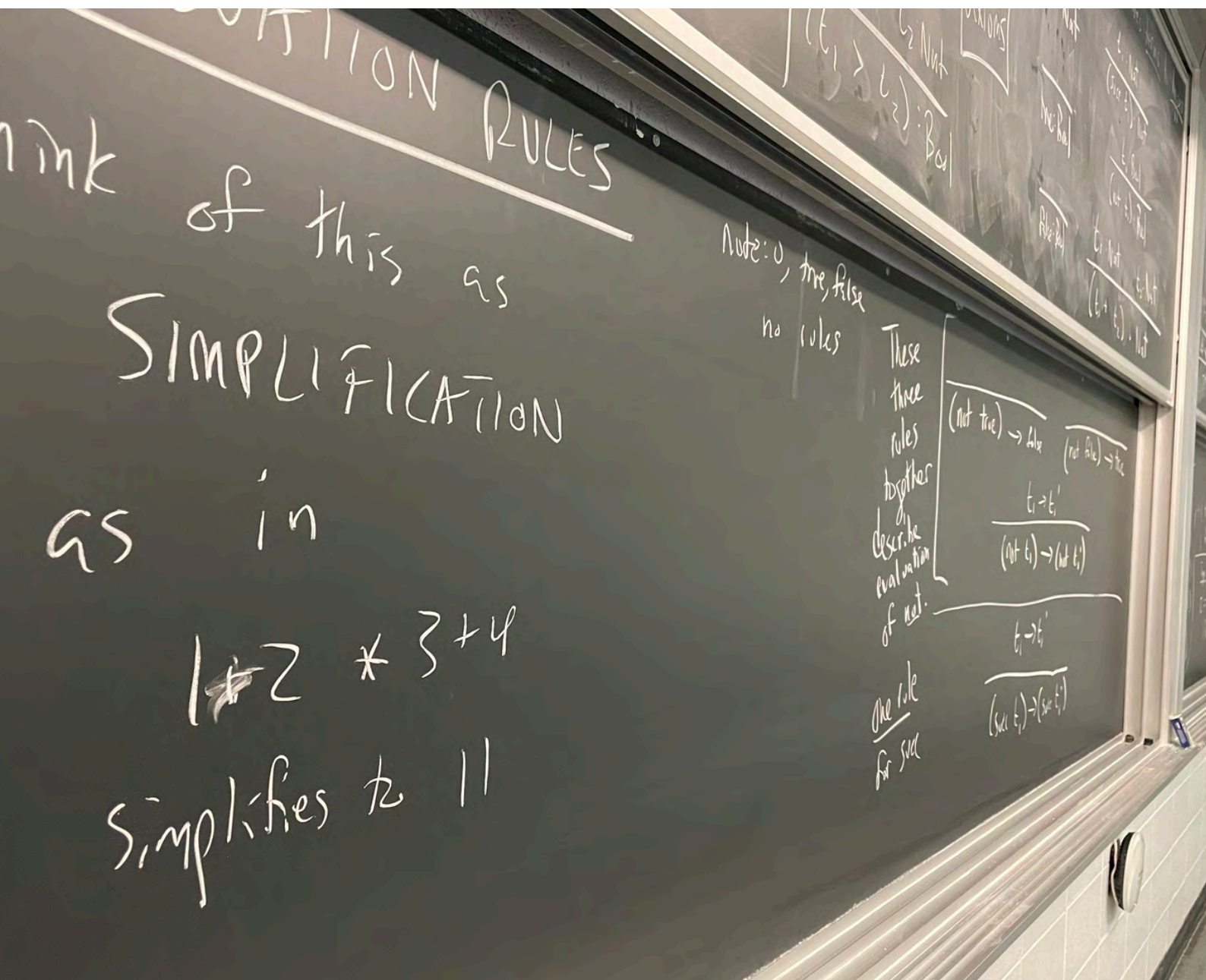


The 2024 multi-university cohort convened in Washington, DC in June 2024 for a week of training and to participate in a conference.

SUMMER INTERNSHIP

Our center has co-organized a multi-university summer internship program for five summers between 2019 and present. Each summer, two UChicago students join peers from other universities to work as a cohort. These students are based across the country, so it's a remote internship, but we organize an in-person training week for all the students. In 2023, the students gathered in Chicago on our campus, and in 2024, they convened in Washington, DC on the campus of American University and participated in the annual conference of the Democratic Erosion Consortium. The 2024 cohort of students hailed from seven universities: University of Chicago, Dartmouth College, University of Houston, Texas Southern University, Tulane University, Xavier University of Louisiana, and William & Mary, with internship team leaders from two other universities as well: Northeastern and Michigan State.

The summer interns work on a number of research projects around a dataset of incidents of global democratic erosion known as the Democratic Erosion Event Dataset. They coded new data points for the dataset, completed data visualization projects, and laid the groundwork for a new dataset of democratic erosion within the United States, among other projects.



RESEARCH

UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF POLITICAL RHETORIC

This year, our team members ran a number of survey experiments and text-as-data projects to explore the effects of political rhetoric on political beliefs and activities in Mexico and the United States.

Autocratic Leaders Build Tolerance for Backsliding by “Trash-Talking” Democracy

Would-be autocrats who seek to build public toleration for democratic backsliding have a little-noticed strategy at their disposal: degrading their democracies in the eyes of their citizens. If voters can be induced to believe that their democracy is already broken, then nothing of value is lost when leaders attack the courts, vilify the press, or undermine confidence in elections. We call this strategy trash-talking democracy, and study it in the context of contemporary Mexico. We use text-as-data methods to show that President Andrés Manuel López Obrador spends more time trash-talking his democracy than he does trying to deepen partisan polarization. With a survey experiment among the Mexican population in September 2023, we show that exposure to López Obrador’s trash-talking of the courts elicits anti-democratic attitudes among Mexicans — both among his supporters and among supporters of the opposition. This suggests that strategies to resist backsliding should include not just efforts at de-polarization but also at restoring confidence in democratic institutions.

Can Rebuttals Restore Confidence in Eroding Democracies?

Unlike military leaders who carry out coups, backsliding leaders need to be attentive to public opinion. How do backsliders retain public support at the same time that they attack democratic institutions? One way is by deploying a rhetoric of denigration, trying to persuade the public that the institutions they are undermining are corrupt, ineffective, or captured by opposition partisans. Can misleading depictions of institutions be effectively rebutted? Are partisan supporters of backsliding leaders a lost cause, or can additional information blunt the impact on them of diatribes that distort the image of democratic institutions? We explore these questions in the case of Mexico, using two methods: 1) We conducted two survey experiments among the Mexican population, in November/December 2023 and in April/May 2024, and 2) text-as-data analysis of the president’s daily news conferences. We have submitted a paper for publication, and will share more information when it is published.

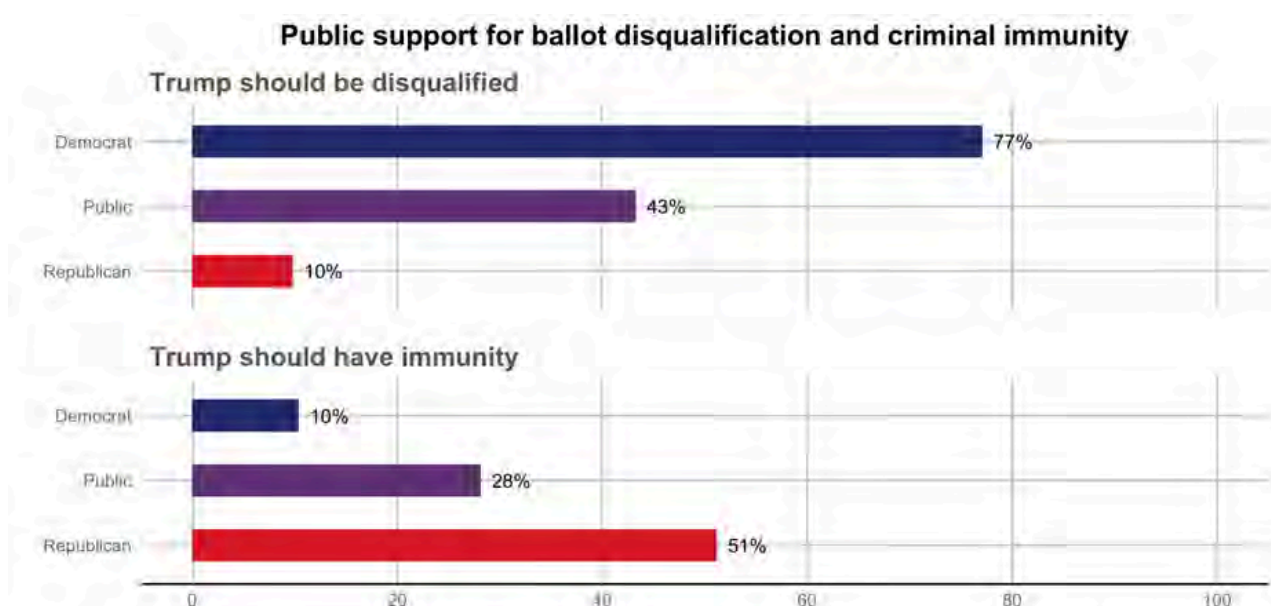
Election Surveys in Mexico and the United States

We ran a survey among the Mexican population ahead of their presidential election on June 2, 2024, and another one after the election to gauge views on confidence in the country’s electoral administration. We also ran a similar set of pre- and post-election survey questions in the United States around the U.S. election in the fall 2024.

BRIGHT LINE WATCH

We continued to house Bright Line Watch, which 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.

In 2023-24, we ran two survey waves (the 19th and 20th of the initiative's total). We released reports and all the associated data for both reports, in July 2023 and March 2024, respectively.



An example of a chart from Bright Line Watch's March 2024 report. Bright Line Watch releases a full report and all accompanying data for every survey it runs.



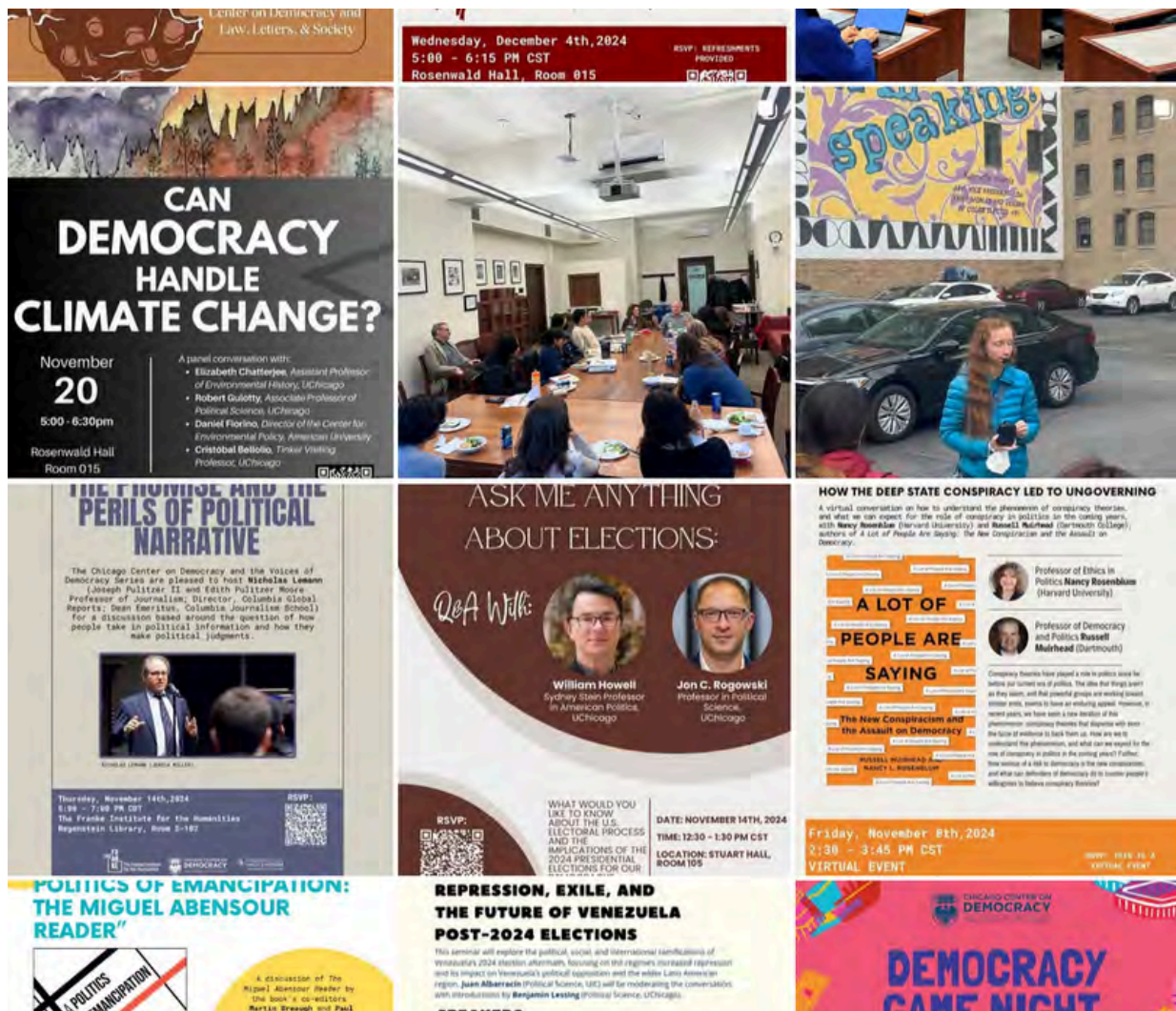
Our event “Exploring The Connections Between Improv And Democratic Movements” in January 2024 included a lecture on the origins of improv in a movement to “socialize democracy,” along with improv exercises.

ENGAGEMENT AND COLLABORATION

BUILDING OUR COMMUNITY ON SOCIAL MEDIA

This year, we established accounts on several social media platforms, including Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and LinkedIn.

- Instagram: [@UChiDemocracy](https://www.instagram.com/UChiDemocracy)
- Twitter: [@UChiDemocracy](https://twitter.com/UChiDemocracy)
- Facebook: [ChicagoCenterOnDemocracy](https://www.facebook.com/ChicagoCenterOnDemocracy)
- YouTube: [@ChicagoCenterOnDemocracy](https://www.youtube.com/ChicagoCenterOnDemocracy)
- LinkedIn: [Chicago Center on Democracy](https://www.linkedin.com/company/ChicagoCenterOnDemocracy)



The Chicago Center on Democracy's new Instagram page, [@UChiDemocracy](https://www.instagram.com/UChiDemocracy)

DISCUSSING DEMOCRACY IN THE MEDIA

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.

- "Why the US 'does not get to assume that it lasts forever'" (*CNN*, July 4, 2023)
- "\$230,000: The price at which the average American would give up democracy" (*Big Think*, December 1, 2023)
- "Americans think democracy is in peril in the 2024 election" (*ABC News*, February 1, 2024).
- "What Trump's total GOP control means next" (*The Atlantic*, June 6, 2024).

The Bright Line Watch initiative are consistently mentioned in various media outlets, including *The New Yorker*, *Slate*, and the *Washington Post*. News mentions this year include:

- "This may be the strongest legal case against Trump" (*Slate*, July 26, 2023)
- "Public opinion about Trump's criminality is shifting—a bit" (*The New Yorker*, July 31, 2023)
- "Trump indictment over 2020 election is shocking, but may come without political consequences" (*The Globe and Mail*, August 1, 2023)
- "The right-wing attack on democracy is not limited to Donald Trump" (*The New Republic*, March 14, 2024)



Some of our 2023-24 news mentions

OUR COLLABORATORS

We strive to continually build connections with centers and departments across campus. This year, we collaborated with more than 20 entities at the university on events and student activities, including:

- Center for East European and Russian/Eurasian Studies
- Center for International Social Science Research
- Center for Latin American Studies
- Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality
- Center for the Study of Race, Politics and Culture
- The Chicago Center for Contemporary Theory
- Cinema and Media Studies
- Classics of Social and Political Thought
- Committee on Environment, Geography and Urbanization
- Department of Visual Arts
- The Forum on Law and Legalities
- George J. Stigler Center for the Study of the Economy and the State
- International House
- Karla Scherer Center for the Study of American Culture
- Latin American Matters
- Law, Letters, and Society
- Neubauer Collegium
- Parrhesia Program for Public Discourse
- Pozen Center for Human Rights
- UChicagoGRAD
- UChiVotes

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are very grateful to all who have supported the Chicago Center on Democracy this year, including our collaborators, colleagues, event participants, and financial supporters.

We have benefited from financial support this year from:

- Center for International Social Science Research
- Democracy Fund
- International Institute of Research in Paris
- Hewlett Foundation
- Malyi Center for the Study of Institutional and Legal Integrity
- Parrhesia Program for Public Discourse
- Social Sciences Collegiate Division, UChicago
- Social Sciences Division, UChicago





CHICAGO CENTER ON
DEMOCRACY
THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

The vision of the Chicago Center on Democracy
is for all people to understand how democracy works
and how to strengthen democratic institutions.

We invite you to join us in working toward this vision.



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