

The University of Rochester Democracy Center

Inaugural Year Strategic Plan

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Gretchen Helmke

Stu Jordan

The University of Rochester Democracy Center is a new research center committed to the study and advancement of democracy in the United States and around the world. Housed in the Political Science Department, the Democracy Center supports cutting-edge, non-partisan, social scientific research on the many challenges facing contemporary democracies. The Democracy Center aims to serve as a point of connection across the many faculty, alumni, students, and members of the community who are passionate about protecting and expanding democracy.

Intellectual Mission

Preserving democracy is one of the fundamental challenges of our generation. Over the last decade, the number of countries around the globe experiencing democratic erosion has far outpaced the number of countries undergoing democratization. From India and Brazil to Turkey and the United States, this so-called “wave of autocratization” has chipped away at the foundations of democratic governance in many of the world’s most populous democracies. By stoking polarization and spreading disinformation, would-be authoritarian leaders have sought to control or destroy independent institutions, undermine faith in elections, and encourage violence by their supporters. As of 2022, electoral autocracies -- in which elections take place, but are neither free nor fair -- have become the most common type of regime in the world, with some three billion people now living under this form of government.

Building on Rochester’s signature scientific approach to politics, the Democracy Center aims to engage faculty across disciplines and universities to pursue objective and rigorous scholarship centered on four core areas of inquiry related to democracy and the threat of democratic erosion:

Political Institutions and Norms. How well do the various institutional structures of representative democracy, such as legislatures, political parties, courts and electoral systems accurately reflect public preferences and serve to promote democratic stability? Which types of constitutions and political cultures constrain authoritarian threats to democracy, and which types serve as tools for exacerbating such threats?

Polarization, Race and Identity. How well do different democratic institutions promote and preserve pluralism and the protection of peoples marginalized on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality in the face of reactionary political movements and disinformation campaigns?

Inequality and Development. What role do economic performance and economic and social inequalities play in turning the tide against democracy? Are democracies and market-based economies necessarily mutually reinforcing?

Populism, Globalization and Immigration. Under what conditions do changes wrought by globalization and immigration lead to populism and the erosion of liberal democracy? How can parties, political leaders and civic organizations effectively respond to populist threats and curtail would-be authoritarian leaders?

As well as facilitating peer-reviewed academic research publications related to these key themes, the Democracy Center aims to influence and improve the quality of public intellectual discourse. Having re-shaped the discipline of political science by launching the rational choice revolution, the faculty in the Political Science Department at the University of Rochester continue to push forward the frontiers of the field; thus they will serve as an unparalleled source of research-driven insights about the many challenges facing democracy. As the Democracy Center gets underway in its inaugural year, we will build on this rich intellectual foundation to actively engage with faculty across disciplines within the University of Rochester and across other leading universities to join us in this important mission.

Inaugural Year

Our research and civic engagement programs during the Democracy Center's inaugural year will cultivate connections across scholars, academic disciplines, universities and civic organizations to shed light on the most pressing challenges the world's democracies face.

Research Programs

- **Faculty Working Group.** Launched in summer 2022, the Faculty Affiliate Working Group meets monthly to share and discuss their research on democracy. Working papers produced by the group will be published in accessible non-technical form on the Democracy Center's website.
- **Bright Line Watch Virtual Roundtable.** The Democracy Center, in collaboration with the University of Chicago's Center on Democracy and the Democratic Erosion Consortium at Brown University will organize a series of virtual roundtable discussions focused on the Bright Line Watch public and expert surveys during the 2022 election cycle.
- **Visiting Scholars Program.** The Center will host two to three visiting scholars during each academic year. Visitors will represent highly promising young scholars who will help to enrich discussions of democracy among University of Rochester faculty and students.
- **Research Grants.** The Center will offer grants to graduate students to support field experiments, survey research, field research, and data collection on projects that shed light on the Democracy Center's four key research themes.

- **Annual Conference on Democracy.** The inaugural annual conference will take place in the spring of 2023. It will convene scholars from across the globe to share cutting-edge work on the processes through which nations transition from democracy to autocracy.

Civic Engagement Programs

- **Moving Beyond Polarization: Lessons from Around the Globe.** The Democracy Center is partnering with civic organizations Civic Genius and Beyond Conflict to bring a cohort of renowned international leaders to Rochester for a unique face-to-face conversation with the community. These leaders were all instrumental in ending conflicts in places like South Africa, Northern Ireland, and Israel, and are eager to help Americans apply their lessons learned to our current political crisis.
- **Undergraduate Internships.** In partnership with civic organization Civic Genius, the Democracy Center is piloting academic internship program in which undergraduates will gain hands-on experience developing and providing civic education and community building programming to address some of the most important challenges to democratic functioning, including political disengagement, partisan polarization and distrust of political institutions.
- **Partnerships:** Democracy Center leadership will be in conversation throughout the inaugural year with Rochester area civic and political institutions to discover opportunities to strengthen democracy beyond the university campus. They will also actively engage student political organizations to discuss creative ways to facilitate student contributions to the strength of democracy.

Scaling Up Activities

Launching in fall 2022, the first year of the Democracy Center will be spent cultivating intellectual connections across the University of Rochester, with various outreach activities to other departments, institutes, faculty and students beyond Political Science. For example, the Center will begin work on creating a university-wide Democracy Day coinciding with the 2024 United States presidential elections similar to the one pioneered by Stanford University in 2021. The Center will also convene an expert discussion on the contributions universities can make to the health of democracy, offering students, faculty and alumni an opportunity to learn about the relevance to democracy of the full array University of Rochester programs and initiatives.

In addition, the Center will also seek to extend its academic collaboration with other leading university democracy centers across the country, such as the Chicago Center on Democracy at the University of Chicago and the Safeguarding Democracy Project at UCLA. The Center plans to institutionalize such partnerships via a Consortium of Democracy Centers, which would provide a virtual fora for collaboration and for archival activities.

Generously supported by the University of Rochester's AS&E for a renewable three-year period, the Democracy Center will work with the University of Rochester's Office of Advancement toward the creation of an endowed Democracy Center. The Center will also work with the Dean for

Research in AS&E to identify and apply for research grants related to the intellectual mission of the Democracy Center.

As increased funding is secured, the activities of the Democracy Center will be expanded and extended in a number of directions. With additional funding from research grants, the Center could support large-scale, multi-year projects, which could allow the PI to purchase course relief to conduct research (along the lines of NSF). With an endowment, the Center could expand its program of pre-doctoral and post-doctoral fellows, who would continue to broaden the diversity of the University, as well as further deepen its support for research by graduate and undergraduate students by awarding additional grants or fellowships. Finally, with sufficient funding, the Democracy Center could maintain separate state-of-the-art office and shared public space for visitors, students, and affiliated faculty.

Leadership



Gretchen Helmke is Faculty Director of the Democracy Center and Thomas H. Jackson Distinguished University Professor in the Department of Political Science. She is one of the founding members of Bright Line Watch, a non-partisan academic group that monitors threats to American democracy. Helmke is the author of numerous academic books and journal articles on democracy and the rule of law in Latin America and the United States.



Stu Jordan is Associate Director of the Democracy Center and Associate Professor of Instruction in the Department of Political Science. Prior to joining the Democracy Center, he lead efforts to expand community-engaged learning in the University of Rochester undergraduate curriculum as Faculty Director for the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning.