

GLOBAL DEMOCRACY CONFERENCE

Policy Takeaway



In May 2024, the University of Notre Dame's Kellogg Institute for International Studies held its first Global Democracy Conference (GDC), themed "Understanding Today, Shaping Tomorrow." The annual event is a forum where diverse voices — scholars, practitioners, journalists, and advocates — come together to examine democratic erosion amid contemporary challenges and devise ways to strengthen democratic practices worldwide. This short policy note highlights areas where innovative academic research intersects with salient democratic challenges, setting the tone for further discussion at the next GDC, on **"Protecting Democracy from Executive Overreach," May 12-13, 2025, in Washington, DC.**

KEY CHALLENGES FOR UPHOLDING DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS

Democracy challenges at home and abroad take multiple forms. In the US, election tampering and the refusal to accept the 2020 election outcomes discredits the broader electoral process, including poll worker and voter intimidation. Conspiratorial theories and disinformation can further undermine public trust in government legitimacy abroad.

Panelists María Isabel Puerta Riera (Valencia College) and Steven Lloyd Wilson (Brandeis University and Varieties of Democracy Institute) noted that disinformation, sometimes propelled by foreign interference, can "weaponize uncertainty" and further undermine trust in democratic institutions. The proliferation of criminal organizations can create conditions for citizens to support authoritarian leaders and iron-fist policies in exchange for improved security in Latin America. In some African countries, organized crime can take a direct role to influence electoral processes as noted by Rachel Riedl (Cornell University) and Naunihal Singh (US Naval War College).



"... democracy's greatest strength lies at the heart of individuals. Autocrats will assault the minds and hearts of its citizens, but (they) will never repress their desire to be free, that is why they are afraid of their own people."

Juan Sebastián Chamorro

Former Pre-Candidate for the Presidency of Nicaragua and Former Political Prisoner, Hewlett Visiting Fellow for Public Policy at the Kellogg Institute

KEY ACTIONS TO DEFEND DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS

▶ **Strengthen US election administration by increasing funding and professional staffing.**

Panelist Frank Langfitt (NPR) reported that more than 22 states have experienced electoral intimidation of county clerk offices in 2023. It is paramount to safeguard the selection and independence of election administrators to ensure fair and secure elections.

▶ **Tackle online disinformation.**

Invest in robust fact-checking mechanisms within independent media to increase public awareness about false electoral information and counteract disinformation campaigns. Deliberative AI platforms can support constructive public dialogues across digital platforms. Governments can develop community forums or ChatBot models to minimize affective polarization and help foster deliberative conversations.

▶ **Protect participatory democratic institutions from organized criminal activity.**

At the local level, protecting democracy from criminal activity could include community policing and youth leadership in cross-cutting neighborhood community centers. Globally, democracy can be defended from criminal activity through leveraging international partnerships and security coordination.

▶ **Protect at-risk democracy advocates.**

Universities can play a critical role to preserve freedom of expression and strengthen pro-democracy networks. Universities abroad can also host democracy advocates at risk and further amplify their voices and demands.

GET INVOLVED

- ▶ National Endowment for Democracy's Reagan-Fascell Democracy Fellow program and the Kellogg Institute Hewlett Visiting Fellowship for Public Policy offer valuable support to scholars and activists who can contribute to democracy promotion on the ground.
- ▶ Develop scholar-advocate partnerships for democracy-promotion such as the Digital Societies Project and the Consortium for Political Process Strengthening (CEPPS) to combat the sources and effects of disinformation with grounded advocacy.



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