



**DOCUMENTING DEMOCRACY:** “Our goal is to take what we’ve learned from our scholarly work on other parts of the world and bring that perspective to public debates about the quality of democracy in the United States—its vulnerabilities as well as its sources of resilience,” says political scientist Gretchen Helmke. With colleagues at Yale and Dartmouth, she has launched an initiative to survey opinions about democracy, both among the public and political scientists.

# Drawing a Bright Line

Political science professor Gretchen Helmke monitors the state of U.S. democracy.

By Sandra Knispel

**G**retchen Helmke lives and breathes democratic principles. She and her grade-school daughter once drafted an outerwear constitution, signed and ratified by both. Not unlike the constitutions of the nations she studies, the precise meaning of the language of the family outerwear law proved less clear-cut than its framers intended. Helmke sighs at the sight of the constitution that remains pinned to the family's kitchen bulletin board.

"It's a law that remains on the books, but is dead in spirit," she admits.

It's a familiar scenario for the Rochester political science professor who studies constitutional crises—albeit usually ones in Latin America, where the consequences of failed democracies have been dire.

These days the Latin Americanist spends a good chunk of her time monitoring democratic institutions in the United States. The health of such institutions relies, in part, on their perceived legitimacy. She worries that, for many Americans, that legitimacy is in question.

"Growing polarization is what I am most concerned about," says Helmke. With public trust at historic lows and partisanship riding high, she's not alone in her worries. For many Americans, democracy seems more imperiled now than at any time in living memory.

Simply put, one of the greatest threats to democracy is the idea that it is unassailable. That's the tagline of Bright Line Watch, a non-partisan initiative founded by Helmke and three other political scientists—Brendan Nyhan and John Carey of Dartmouth College and Susan Stokes of Yale University.

Two of the three other scholars Helmke already knew well: Stokes was her dissertation advisor at the University of Chicago; Carey, who taught at Rochester before Helmke arrived, recalls being aware of Helmke's research when she was still a graduate student. "Her work was great—like the kind of scholarship I hoped to produce myself,"

Carey, then a junior faculty member, remembers. "When you become aware of a scholar like that, you look for opportunities to collaborate."

The project found its *raison d'être* in the widespread concern over the possible erosion of democratic institutions in this country, says Helmke. The quartet writes that "at a time of potential danger to American democratic norms and institutions, it is more urgent than ever for scholars to highlight the risks to our system of government."

Supported by grants from the Democracy Fund and the Hewlett Foundation, the group set out in the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election to monitor democratic practices in the United States, the system's resilience, and potential threats.

Robert Blair, the Joukowsky Family Assistant Professor of Political Science and International and Public Affairs at Brown University, is the coordinator of a multi-university collaborative course on democratic erosion—taught simultaneously at nearly two dozen universities across the United States and one in the Philippines. Blair says Bright Line Watch has been "extremely valuable" to the consortium. "Students at several participating universities, including Brown, have gotten their hands dirty working with the BLW data. Their survey instrument has given students a lot to think about in terms of what democracy means and how to measure it," says Blair.

He's noticed that, generally, students become more optimistic about the United States after taking the course, attributing that change, in part, to the students' becoming more "expert" in their understanding of democracy and democratic erosion worldwide. "This is quite similar to what Bright Line Watch finds—that experts tend to be more optimistic than the public."

Blair says the democratic erosion consortium is planning more ways to integrate the two initiatives in the future.

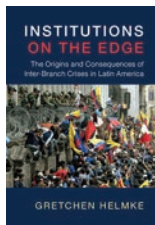
Helmke underscores that Bright Line Watch is not concerned with policy disagreements. Instead, the group focuses on the institutions of democracy, such as free and fair elections, the effectiveness of checks and balances, and the freedom of the press.



## Gretchen Helmke

Professor of Political Science  
Chair, Department of Political Science,  
2011-2013 and 2014-2017

### Major Publications



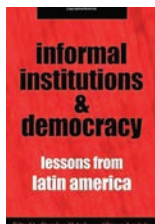
*Institutions on the Edge: The Origins and Consequences of Institutional Instability in Latin America* (Cambridge University Press, 2017) considers interbranch conflict and how a crisis in one branch of government can spill over

to another. Helmke concludes that concentrating power in the presidency triggers political crises across all three branches of government. Surprisingly, often the most constitutionally powerful presidents prove the most fragile, she finds.



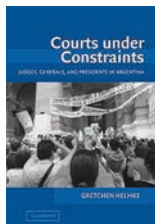
*Courts in Latin America*, coedited with Julio Ríos-Figueroa (Cambridge University Press, 2011) examines to what extent courts in Latin America protect individual rights and limit governments. Drawing

on examples from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Colombia, Costa Rica, and Bolivia, the authors demonstrate widespread variation in the performance of Latin America's constitutional courts.



*Informal Institutions and Democracy: Lessons from Latin America* (Johns Hopkins University Press 2006), coedited with Steven Levitsky, analyzes the function of informal institutions in Latin America and how they

support or weaken democratic governance. Drawing from a wide range of examples, the contributors examine how informal rules shape the performance of state and democratic institutions, including contemporary problems of governability, the “unrule of law,” and the absence of effective representation, participation, and accountability in Latin America.



*Courts Under Constraints: Judges, Generals, and Presidents in Argentina* (Cambridge University Press 2005) grew out of Helmke's dissertation about Argentine courts and why some

deferred to the president while others were independent. Helmke concluded that courts sometimes look independent of the current government when in fact they are already currying favor with the next government.

“Our goal is to take what we've learned from our scholarly work on other parts of the world, and bring that perspective to public debates about the quality of democracy in the United States—its vulnerabilities as well as its sources of resilience,” says Helmke.

To that end, Helmke and her three collaborators compile quarterly reports, based on careful scientific polling of about 1,000 political experts (all of them political science professors at U.S. universities) and a nationally representative sample of 2,000 members of the public. Aiding the group in the design of its surveys is Mitch Sanders '97 (PhD)—a fellow political scientist, and Helmke's husband, who sometimes jokingly refers to himself as “the fifth Beatle.” The results of their survey are “sobering,” the group says.

According to Helmke, on the one hand, the chances of a complete breakdown of democracy in the United States—the kind that occurred in the 20th century in parts of Latin America—are slim. A military-coup-style breakdown, for example, is highly unlikely. Scholars have studied the statistical likelihood of such an event by looking at the relationship between levels of wealth in a given nation and the likelihood of a democratic breakdown. They would put the chances of something like that happening in the United States near zero, she argues—based not only on the overall wealth in the United States, but also on the longevity of American democracy. Research shows that the age of a democracy serves to protect it. The longer, the stronger.

But on the other hand, a gradual erosion of democracy may be at work. “That process—where it's a slow, kind of piecemeal challenge to different institutions that support democracy—is something that we see in several parts of the world, and something that we are now seeing in the United States,” Helmke says.

The group released its fifth survey in May. The participants were given a battery of 27 questions, on topics ranging from free speech and an unimpeded press, to constitutional limits on executive powers, vote representation, and the independence of the judiciary. Helmke and her colleagues detected a significant decrease in confidence on all but four questions, especially in the areas of press freedom, judicial independence, and the integrity of government agencies, among the public sample in the past six months. While those who approve of President Donald Trump rated U.S. democratic performance more highly than those who disapprove, both groups' assessment of U.S. democracy's health declined.

Scrutinizing the U.S. political system on a regular basis was originally not on Helmke's radar. A California native, she began her graduate studies at the University of California at Berkeley, and completed them at the University of Chicago, where she earned her PhD in 2000 under Stokes, who was then a faculty member there. Her dissertation was a study of Argentine courts.

“When she started this work, very few Latin Americanists or comparative politics scholars were studying them,” remembers Stokes, who is now the John S. Saden Professor of Political Science and the director of the Yale Program on Democracy. “Gretchen developed a simple but highly sophisticated model to explain her interesting and, in some ways, surprising findings.” Among those findings was the realization that courts sometimes look independent of the current government when in fact they are already currying favor with the next.

When Helmke first started conducting her field research in Buenos Aires some 20 years ago, it turned out to be an adventure, of sorts. It dawned on her pretty quickly that despite her nearly fluent Spanish, she wasn't getting anywhere fast. In 1997, for a graduate student with no established reputation in the field and little experience, doors didn't exactly fly open. Studying one of the most politicized institutions in Argentina—the Argentine Supreme Court—she often didn't even know on which ones to knock.

“It's very unusual for a young American woman to go to the Supreme Court and ask them what they're doing,” says Helmke.

Helmke would soon learn that in a country like Argentina, she first needed to gain access to the right political networks in order for its key members to help open doors for her and to point her in the right directions. Even looking the part became important. Her student outfit—jeans, a backpack, and tennis shoes—just didn't cut it.

“To be taken seriously by local elites you needed to wear heels and a suit, and carry a bag,” Helmke says. “And you needed business cards.”

Fast forward to today. She's long ditched the heels. On most days, a simple white canvas bag, bearing the logo of a public radio station, holds her iPad and necessary papers. The sneakers have returned. Now the author of multiple scholarly works, she has received prestigious fellowships from the Kellogg Institute for International Studies at the University of Notre Dame, the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard University, and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, D.C. In 2016 Helmke became a full professor.

As a PhD advisor, Helmke has influenced a new generation of scholars. One is Rabia Malik '16 (PhD), currently a postdoctoral associate in political science at New York University Abu Dhabi. Helmke's advice and mentorship "were invaluable to me as a grad student and that hasn't changed since I left," says Malik, who recalls that the road to finding her dissertation topic was anything but linear. "Through the endless months of chasing different ideas that all resulted in dead ends, Gretchen was the one who didn't let me lose hope, despite my fears that I was falling behind. Without her supporting me that way, there's no way I could've completed my PhD, to be blunt."

Last fall, Helmke embarked on a new project, tentatively titled "To My Enemies, the Law"—an utterance attributed to Brazilian President (who at some point turned into a dictator) Getúlio Vargas. In it, Helmke looks at the frequency with which Latin American leaders are put on trial within 10 years after leaving office. With the research assistance of political science honors student Adriana Tobar '18—who has been gathering data on all Latin American leaders since 1980—Helmke can say with confidence that more than a quarter of all democratically elected leaders in the region were, indeed, tried after losing office.

She's now working on a theoretical model to try to understand under what circumstances corruption trials are used as political weapons, and when they actually serve as legitimately working mechanisms of democratic accountability.

The approach illustrates how Helmke's expertise in democratic political institutions and the rule of law—regardless of geographic location—lends itself to Bright Line Watch. Scrutinized in a wider, international context of democratic erosion, certain domestic patterns might become apparent and be recognized more easily.

As the group mulls over the results of its latest survey—and a growing number of media outlets, including the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Wall Street Journal* take notice—they've begun to ponder important hypotheticals. Would violating a democratic principle that most citizens agree on as being vital trigger a defense of American democracy? Would political leaders act against their own immediate partisan interests to protect a higher ideal? And what would be the violation threshold for such a response to occur?

Helmke says her Bright Line work reminds her of a sentence uttered by a then little-known, 28-year-old lawyer. A gifted orator, he would later go on to become one of the most influential presidents of the United States. In one of his first published speeches—the so-called Lyceum Address—given 23 years before the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln talked about threats to the rule of law and political institutions in the United States.

"We hope all dangers may be overcome, but to conclude that no danger may ever arise would itself be extremely dangerous," Lincoln cautioned his audience.

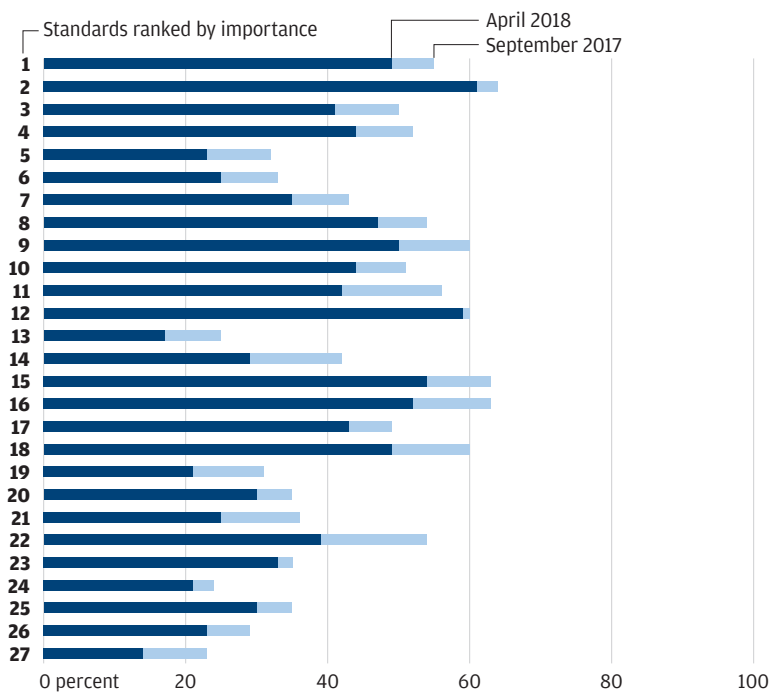
And these days, being aware of such dangers, Helmke says, is more important than ever. **R**

*Listen to a Quadcast conversation with Gretchen Helmke and Mitch Sanders: <http://urochester.libsyn.com/website/2018/04>.*

## Keeping an Eye on Democracy

Bright Line Watch periodically surveys an expert sample of about 1,000 political science faculty at American universities and a nationally representative sample of 2,000 adults. Each group is asked to rate the importance of 27 democratic standards and to assess how they are currently upheld in the United States. Here is a comparison of the public sample's responses from September 2017 and April 2018.

### Public Belief That Democratic Standards Are Mostly or Fully Met



### Democratic Standards

- 1 Elections are conducted, ballots counted, and winners determined without pervasive fraud or manipulation
- 2 All adult citizens have equal opportunity to vote
- 3 All adult citizens enjoy the same legal and political rights
- 4 Citizens have access to information about candidates that is relevant to how they would govern
- 5 Law enforcement investigations of public officials or their associates are free from political influence or interference
- 6 Government officials are legally sanctioned for misconduct
- 7 Elections are free from foreign influence
- 8 Executive authority cannot be expanded beyond constitutional limits
- 9 Citizens can make their opinions heard in open debate about policies that are under consideration
- 10 All votes have equal impact on election outcomes
- 11 The elected branches respect judicial independence
- 12 Government protects individuals' right to engage in peaceful protest
- 13 Government officials do not use public office for private gain
- 14 Government agencies are not used to monitor, attack, or punish political opponents
- 15 Parties and candidates are not barred
- 16 Government protects individuals' right to engage in unpopular speech or expression
- 17 The legislature is able to effectively limit executive power
- 18 The judiciary is able to effectively limit executive power
- 19 Even when there are disagreements about ideology or policy, political leaders generally share a common understanding of relevant facts
- 20 Voter participation in elections is generally high
- 21 The geographic boundaries of electoral districts do not systematically advantage any particular political party
- 22 Government does not interfere with journalists or news organizations
- 23 Information about the sources of campaign funding is available to the public
- 24 Public policy is not determined by large campaign contributions
- 25 Government effectively prevents private actors from engaging in politically motivated violence or intimidation
- 26 Elected officials seek compromise with political opponents
- 27 Political competition occurs without criticism of opponents' loyalty or patriotism

SOURCE: BRIGHTLINEWATCH.ORG