



Democracy Inventory Case Study Stanford University

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Part One: What was the motivation for the inventory?

In Summer 2022, Freeman Spogli Institute (FSI) Faculty Director, Mike McFaul, was approached by the Advisory Board and asked what Stanford is doing on democracy. He did not have a clear answer. While FSI itself has a breadth of projects, programs, and scholars dedicated to the study and advancement of democracy – including dedicated work within the Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law – Stanford is a decentralized campus with multitudes of scholars, research projects, courses, events, and programs informing and engaging the campus community and public on issues related to democracy. That inquiry spurred a motivation to better understand, highlight, and put into broader context those collective activities. The project then organically evolved further into an exploration not only of what are we doing, but what can and should we be doing to reimagine the university's civic mission and contributions to strengthening democracy, in what has now become the [Stanford Democracy Hub](#).

The initial phase of the project was motivated by the following three goals:

1. Develop a comprehensive understanding of Stanford University's collective efforts that stand to advance democracy through a deep-dive inventory;
2. Launch and maintain an online portal to expand awareness – internally and among the general public – that enhances the flow of information and possibilities for coordination, collaboration, and engagement;
3. Provide recommendations for pathways forward to amplify existing efforts, build an infrastructure to catalyze collaborations and new ideas, and elevate awareness of and commitment to the advancement of democracy as a collective responsibility that is central to the mission of the university.

Part Two: Who was involved, in what ways?

During the 2022–23 academic year, under the faculty leadership of democracy scholar Larry Diamond and dedicated staff leadership of Thomas Schnaubelt and Karina Kloos alongside a small student team, the group systematically cataloged Stanford University courses, research, engagement activities, and events that focused on advancing democracy, as well as the people behind those efforts.

A fundamental assumption guiding the team was that no one entity at Stanford “owns” democracy building. Rather, the defense, reimagination, and advancement of democracy is a collective responsibility that is central to the mission of the university¹ and something that students, alumni, faculty, staff, schools, departments, centers, and our broader community all help to achieve. The team therefore embarked on a highly collaborative, process-oriented learning journey – a journey intended to reflect the same kind of democratic values identified in the inventory. This collaborative process included:

- Dedicated staff (two people, part-time on this project), a highly regarded faculty lead, and a small (4) student RA team;
- Institutional support from three leading centers: Center for Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law; Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society; and Haas Center for Public Service;
- More than seventy interviews with Stanford community members, including intentional engagement across each of the Deans offices and across institutions, centers, and programs that lead democracy- and civil society-related efforts;
- Identification of and ongoing engagement with a set of fifty-plus [project advisors](#) comprised of faculty, staff, and student in order to solicit regular feedback, including quarterly focus group conversations to provide reflection and input on the process and initial observations through the inventory;
- Undergraduate student workshops and surveys;
- Email dissemination to more than 300 people at Stanford identified as having touchpoints with democracy activities to solicit additional feedback on the inventory and set of ideas;
- Creation of a broadly available, online portal to further crowdsource information and reflection;

¹ Stanford’s Founding Grant articulates the institution’s purpose as: “Promot[ing] the public welfare by exercising an influence on behalf of humanity and civilization, teaching the blessings of liberty regulated by law, and inculcating love and reverence for the great principles of government as derived from the inalienable rights of man to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

- Ongoing coordination with Johns Hopkins University, who underwent a similar institutional learning effort, to exchange lessons learned and co-develop a peer institution landscape assessment of democracy initiatives; and
- Direct engagement with leaders of existing efforts to explore how the Stanford Democracy Initiative might lift up the work they do and connect to other efforts and aspirations across campus, which informed our set of recommendations in the final report.

*SAMPLE TOOL: The following chart illustrates our processes and deliverables, using a framework that is adaptable to other contexts.

	Purpose	Approach	Output(s)
Phase	Why are we doing this? What's the objective of this phase?	What do we need to do to accomplish this objective? How do we get there?	What will be produced if we carry out these tasks?
Phase 1: Identifying project leads and advisors <i>Who are the key stakeholders?</i> <i>September- December 2022</i>	Establish institutional and individual leadership responsible for building momentum and operationalizing ideas and convenings Create buy-in, investment, and momentum Establish a community of knowledgeable stakeholders and advocates	Engage institutional leaders and establish partnerships Engage with campus stakeholders who have a vested interest in the initiative through 1:1 conversations, FGDs, and donor/institution presentations Hire research assistants	Established institutional partners: Establish the research and leadership team. Identify and engage set of project advisors (approx 50)
Phase 2: Clarifying expectations and parameters of the initiative <i>What core activities, democracy-adjacent activities, and democratic ethos, values, and skills will be included in our inventory?</i> <i>December-January 2023</i>	Establish clear expectations regarding the project goals, timeline, and deliverables Develop clear parameters for what we mean by "advancing democracy" and a clear typology and process for mapping activities	Develop initial draft matrix and parameters document and project overview slidedeck Obtain feedback via focus groups Develop and implement a poll to clarify specific democratic ethos, values, and skills to be included	Stanford Democracy Initiative Overview Boundaries & Horizons Process & Deliverables (this doc)

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<p>Phase 3: Collecting and compiling information on existing activities</p> <p><i>What existing activities fit within the parameters?</i></p> <p><i>January–March 2023</i></p>	<p>Develop a comprehensive understanding of the activities taking place at Stanford that fit within the established parameters of “advancing democracy”</p> <p>Develop awareness of peer institution activities to elevate their role in advancing democracy</p>	<p>Inventory activities and events:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Courses • Research • Engagements • People • Events mapping <p>Develop crowdsourcing survey</p> <p>Review peer institution initiatives and activities</p> <p>Collaborate with Stanford Web Services to design and launch initial website</p>	<p>Completed inventory</p> <p>Peer institution assessment</p> <p>Initial website: democracy.sites.stanford.edu</p>
<p>Phase 4: Big picture visioning and deliberative planning</p> <p><i>What role should Stanford play in advancing democracy? Which exemplar activities should be elevated and expanded? What gaps need to be filled? Where are there new opportunities for collaboration and innovation?</i></p> <p><i>March–May 2023</i></p>	<p>Develop a shared, expanded vision for the role Stanford plays in advancing democracy</p>	<p>Convene a series of workshops to share the results of the inventory; deliberate on the strengths, gaps, and opportunities based on existing activities; deliberate recommendations on pathways forward:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • March 20, 21: 2nd round FGDs w/ Project Advisors on inventory reflections • April 20: student workshop • May 2, 3: 3rd / final round FGDs with Project Advisors to deliberate on set of recommendations <p>Work with external peers to further inform assessment and recommendations through comparative perspective and expertise</p>	<p>Preliminary report on exemplars, gaps, and new opportunities with recommendations on pathways forward</p> <p>Stanford Daily coverage</p>

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Phase	Why are we doing this? What's the objective of this phase?	What do we need to do to accomplish this objective? How do we get there?	What will be produced if we carry out these tasks?
Phase 5: Finalizing and disseminating recommendations <i>Who needs to be aware of the information we've collected and our recommendations?</i> <i>May-June 2023</i>	Share information and recommendations with key stakeholders	Invite broader set of stakeholders to review and comment on the preliminary report → refine recommendations Share report with FSI & University leadership, funders, peer institutions	Final Report with inventory summary and recommendations for expanding and strengthening democracy-advancing activities at Stanford
Phase 6: Strengthening and expanding activities that advance democracy <i>Summer/Fall 2023</i>	Move the set of recommendations into action through partnership, clear visioning, and capacity building, i.e., leadership, funding, staffing	Secure additional funding Secure personnel (dedicated staff lead, part-time + new student team) Pilot working groups to address select gaps, advance select priorities Engage university partners and leaders	Pilot launch of the Stanford Democracy Hub in October 2023

Part Three: What were some of the challenges along the way and key lessons learned?

Takeaway One: Overcoming landscape assessment fatigue.

Perhaps distinctive of the particular time in which the inventory process commenced (though likely not so dissimilar to other campus contexts) was the level of landscape assessment fatigue that existed on campus. In addition to routine accreditation activity, the campus had recently engaged in a comprehensive planning process and had been immersed in a variety of campus culture assessments.

This led to a general skepticism of partaking in such efforts. Having a clear and concrete purpose and process (see above framework) did not convert every skeptic, but it did help guide the team conducting the inventory and foster patience and trust in the process.

Takeaway Two: Clarifying and then rightsizing inventory precision.

A second challenge was that a great deal of time and energy was expended on defining democracy and the parameters for what was to be included in the inventory. While the conversations were useful and productive in convening interested stakeholders who might not otherwise get together to discuss the institution's civic purpose, it is unclear how much the broader engagement of stakeholders was beneficial; better might have been to stick with a small number of people involved in the definitional and operational guidance.

The following framework was developed, which may be useful to others to expedite this process:

Civics & Democracy Categories

It is conceivable that nearly any educational, engagement, or research activity could be considered an effort to advance a campus's civic purpose and contributions to democracy. One approach is to use some kind of categorical typology to further differentiate, sift, and select what might be included in a democracy inventory.

The following categorical framework builds from the inventory process at Stanford University ([illustrated here](#)) and is akin to the University of Virginia [Karsh Institute's three pillars](#) related to democracy: (1) norms and culture, (2) laws and institutions, and (3) social and economic conditions.

1. Civic and Democratic Ethos, Values, and Skills. These include activities that purposefully, as a core aim of the effort, develop the ethos, values, and skills essential to civic engagement and democratic citizenship, such as critical inquiry, viewpoint diversity, constructive dialogue and deliberation, liberty, equality, justice, etc. (See [Civic and Democratic Ethos](#) for multiple frameworks on values and skills that can guide an inventory.)
2. Democratic Institutions and Processes. These include the formal structures and processes of democratic governance, the political system, and the rule of law.
3. Interrelated Social and Economic Conditions. These include the social and economic conditions that underpin and influence the formal structures and processes of democratic systems, such as:
 - Civil Society, e.g. community/nonprofit organizations, advocacy/activism
 - Media & Information, e.g. digital and media literacy, mis-/dis-information, freedom of the press
 - Peace & Security, e.g. international cooperation, cyber security
 - Polarization & Partisanship, e.g. political ideology, affective polarization

- Political Economy, e.g. economic inequality, free market liberalism
- Race, Ethnicity & Identity, e.g. multiracial democracy, gender and politics
- Rights & Justice, e.g. human rights, racial justice
- Science & Technology, e.g. tech platforms, AI
- Sustainability & Environmental Governance, e.g. climate politics, environmental shocks on political behaviors

This typology assumes that strengthening and upholding democracy is not confined to formal democratic institutions and processes. Quite the contrary; democracies are only as strong as the civic knowledge, skills, norms, and practices among its constituents. Furthermore, there are many issues that enhance – or disrupt – stable, healthy democracies, such as the vibrancy of civil society to activate civic identities and hold to account political processes; economic conditions that allow for greater social and political equality; freedom of the press and information systems; etc.

The following matrix is a tool that can be used to help flesh out the parameters of campus’s democracy inventory, intended to be used as a conceptual heuristic through an iterative process of what belongs, what doesn’t, and how best it might be characterized.

The following provides an example of how this matrix has been applied and maintained through the [Stanford Democracy Hub](#), with some specific examples.

	Democratic Ethos, Values, Skills	Democratic Institutions and Processes	Social and Economic Conditions
<p>Civic Learning</p> <p>Coursework; Symposia; Skills development; Student groups, fellowships, internships</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Citizenship in the 21st Century 1st year curriculum • Democracy & Disagreement course • Access to Justice: Law, Policy and Legal Ethics course • Stanford Political Union student group • Intercollegiate Civil Disagreement Program at the Center for Ethics in Society 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • American Political Institutions course • Public Policy Program • Stanford in Washington • Stanford Votes • Stanford in Government student group 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technology and National Security course • Environmental Law and Policy course • Big Local Journalism course • Political Economics and Environmental Sustainability Conference • JSK Journalism Fellowship
<p>Civic & Democratic Engagement</p> <p>Civic participation; Community partnership, convening, coalition building; Volunteerism, community service, public service; Advocacy and organizing; Public policy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Haas Center for Public Service • Office of Community Engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Office of Government Affairs • State and Local Governance Initiative • Fisher Family Fellows on Democracy and Development (for leading public servants around the world) • Law and Policy Lab 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • California Civic Data Coalition • Three Strikes Project • Silicon Valley Joint Ventures <> Office of Gov’t Affairs monthly luncheons on public policy issues

<p>Research</p> <p>Research centers, institutes, departments, labs; Research projects/grants; Scholarship/publications; People</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliberative Democracy Lab • Good American Citizenship Working Group • Strengthening Democracy Challenge to decrease affective polarization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program on American Democracy in Comparative Perspective • Stanford Constitutional Law Center • Western Governance and Policy research project 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empowering Diverse Digital Citizens Lab • Program on Identity, Democracy, and Justice • Socialism and Free Market Capitalism Project • Comparative Politics of Climate Change Policy

A related challenge was right-sizing the expectations for precision. Due to the sheer number of activities under review, the determination of whether an activity was ultimately included, and where, was made by a small group of people based on their subjective interpretation of the operational definitions. While activities were double coded in an effort to increase the quality and consistency of the inventory, at some point there are diminishing returns to investments of time; the old adage of “don’t let perfect be the enemy of done!” soon became relevant here.

Takeaway Three: Combining rigor with creativity in the inventory process.

A third challenge was that while the course review offered a finite population for review (the list of all course offerings from the registrar’s office), other activities did not have a ready-made go-to list. So, a “snowball” approach was used, starting with the more obvious democracy-related departments (e.g. political science) and centers to identify projects and people at a more granular level and then cross-referenced our lists, i.e. reviewing more closely who was involved in the activities, and then examining all the activities those people were involved with. Still, additional programs, projects, student groups, etcetera were identified through the interviews or even happenstance. The key takeaway, similar to above, was both developing methodical approaches to use as best as possible while still being flexible and creative in the process.

Takeaway Four: Engaging widely.

A fourth challenge was the ambiguous nature of any next steps. While there had been a clear remit from the Faculty Director and Board Advisory of the Freeman Spogli Institute to undertake the inventory process, it was not clear what would come of it nor was there designated funding or broader university-level endorsement. Further, the more ambitious level of providing recommendations for what we should be doing – not just a reflection on what we are doing – required leadership buy-in. We accomplished this through strategic engagement (e.g. who was involved in the process; who received

the report) and just overall engaging a lot of people throughout the process, what ultimately felt most akin to community organizing.

Part Four: What did the effort ultimately produce or lead to?

The deep-dive inventory and crowdsourcing of feedback and ideas led to a comprehensive report, [Stanford Democracy Initiative: June 2023 Report and Recommendation](#), that provided an overview of our process, outlined key observations from the inventory, and provided a set of recommendations to expand and strengthen Stanford's collective approach to advancing democracy. The report was shared directly with the Freeman Spogli Institute Faculty Director and Advisory Board, who had initiated the inventory, as well as other strategic leaders and the broad group of people (300+) who had been invited to participate in some way in the review process.

Ultimately, the inventory effort and this report led to the launch of the [Stanford Democracy Hub](#) in the following year, which was subsequently adopted and is now supported at the highest levels of the university: the Office of the Provost and the Dean's Office for the School of Humanities and Sciences, serving as the "connective tissue" to "elevate and amplify collective efforts that strengthen democracy."

The Democracy Hub now maintains an ongoing, updated inventory with student support and is also exploring with partners at George Mason University ways to develop AI-assisted approaches to more systematically maintaining the inventory. The Hub also leads working groups to address gaps that were identified by the report, for example: (1) coordination across leading student groups, what developed into the "StandForDemocracy" student group coalition; (2) an ongoing local civic and democratic engagement working group to strengthen research, partnerships, and student engagement at the local and state level; and (3) coordination through a community of practice around constructive dialogue, in partnership with the university's new ePluribus Stanford initiative.

The Democracy Hub played a key coordinating and informational role around the 2024 election, partnering with the Office of the President and Provost and dozens of others across campus to offer a centralized space for voter information; campus policies and guidelines; and wellbeing, in addition to being a centralized space for the dozens of democracy related events. Finally, the Democracy Hub maintains partnerships with initiatives across campus, including advisory roles with student groups and collaborations with other programs and initiatives, and is continually exploring new opportunities to provide support and add value to the campus community.

Title

H1

H2

H3