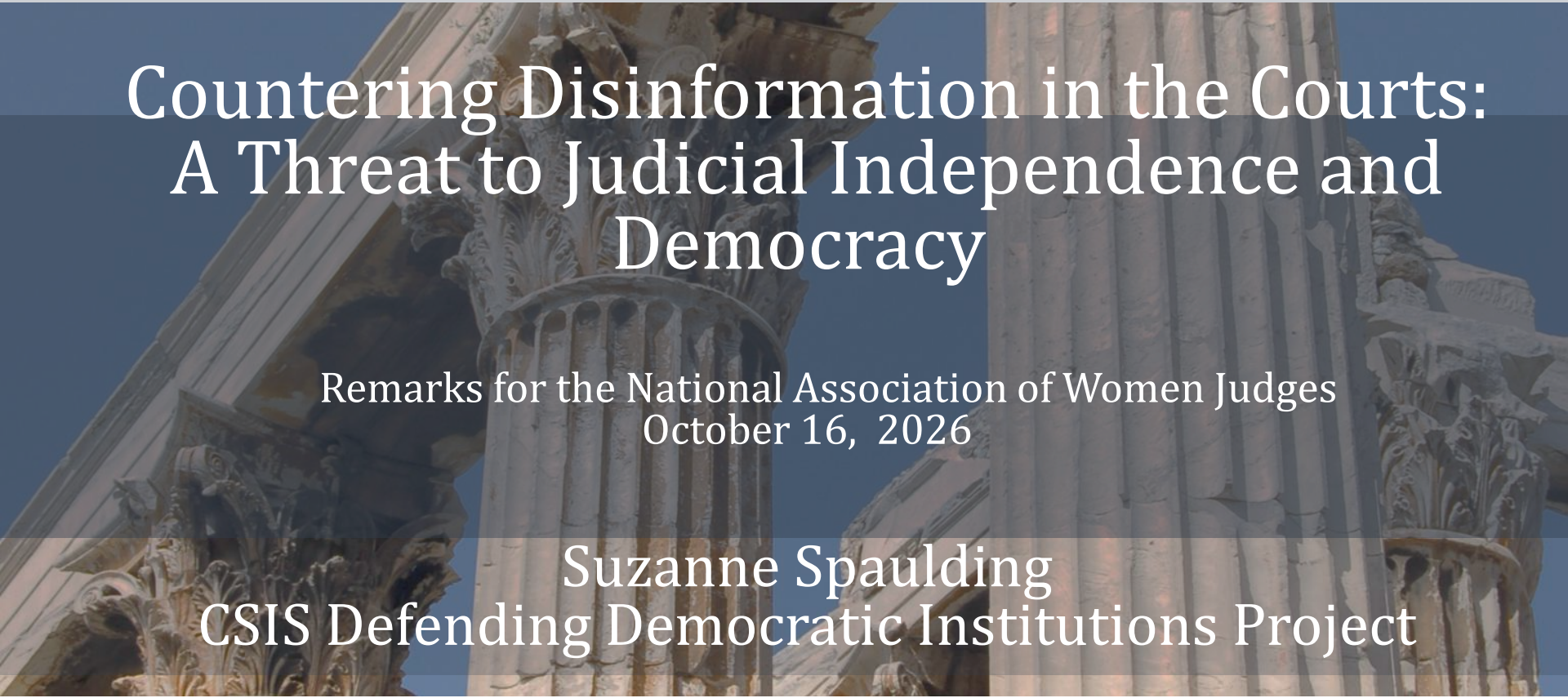


Countering Disinformation in the Courts: A Threat to Judicial Independence and Democracy

Remarks for the National Association of Women Judges
October 16, 2026

Suzanne Spaulding
CSIS Defending Democratic Institutions Project

Overview

1. Declining trust in institutions, including courts
2. Case study – Russian Disinformation Operations Targeting Justice System
3. Rebuilding trust and strengthen societal resilience

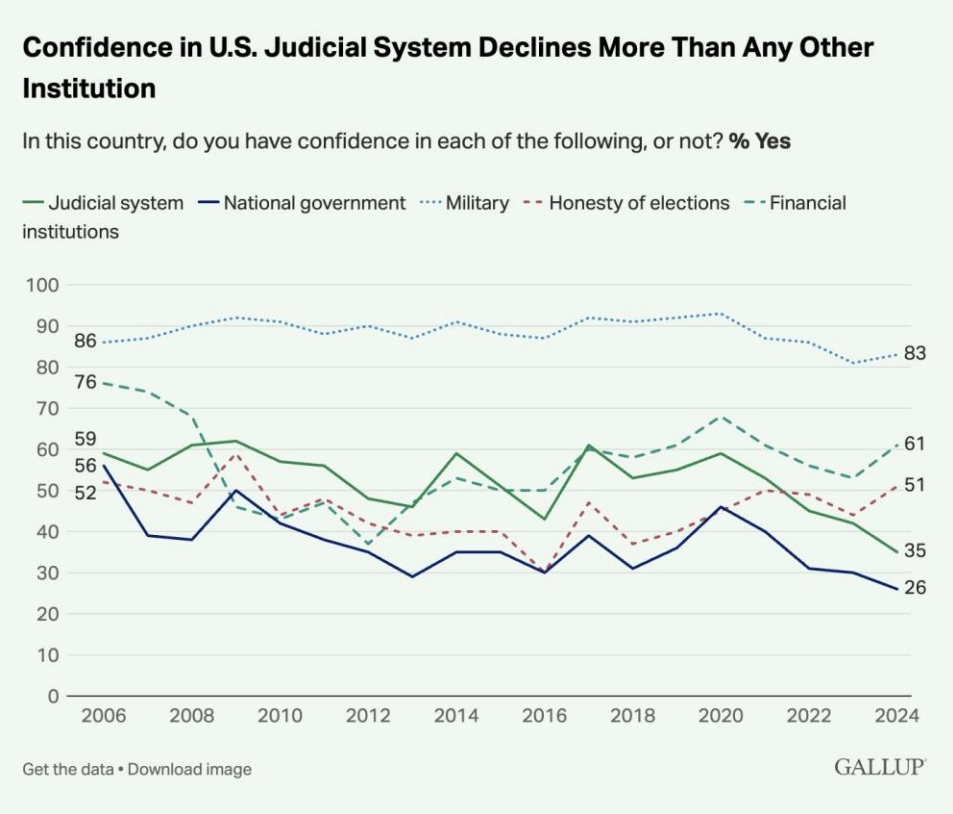
Declining Trust in the Justice System



- Americans' confidence in their nation's judicial system and courts dropped to a record-low 35% in 2024.

(Gallup, October 2024)

Declining Trust in the Justice System



Trust in the judicial system **declined more than any other U.S. institution** in 2024 *(Gallup, October 2024)*

Declining Trust in the Justice System

59% of respondents to a National Center for State Courts Survey believe that state courts are political. *(NCSC, Dec. 2024)*

CSIS Defending Democratic Institutions Report



The Nature of the Threat

- **Russian information operations, but other countries are engaged in similar activities, as are domestic voices.**

- **Information operations exploit weaknesses and vulnerabilities of our own making.**

- **This is not about criticism of the courts. Reform advocates seek improvements. Foreign adversaries seek to weaken democracy.**

The “Lisa” Case



Twin Falls, Idaho

The New York Times Magazine



FEATURE

How Fake News Turned a Small Town Upside Down

At the height of the 2016 election, exaggerated reports of a juvenile sex crime brought a media maelstrom to Twin Falls — one the Idaho city still hasn't recovered from.

Main Avenue East in Twin Falls, Idaho. Harris Mizrahi for The New York Times

Twin Falls, Idaho





Secured Borders (Twin Falls, Idaho)



AUG
27

Citizens before refugees

Public · Hosted by Secured Borders

Putin's View of the American Justice System

"The United States stripped Russia of the right to use our property, which is a clear violation of Russia's property rights," Putin told reporters in China. "So, to begin with, I will ask our Foreign Ministry to file a lawsuit. We will see how effectively the much-lauded American judicial system works."

Joel Gehrke, "Vladimir Putin's lawsuit threat dismissed by State Department," *Washington Examiner*, September 5, 2017



Narrative Frames

These frames are used to challenge the independence and impartiality of the U.S. Justice System

- The justice system tolerates protects, and covers up crimes committed by **immigrants**
- The justice system operationalizes the institutionally racist and corrupt **police state**
- The justice system directly supports and enables **corporate corruption**
- The justice system is a tool of the **political elite**

RT Program -- "America's Lawyer"

"...to say that the justice system in the United States is broken would be a gross understatement. Corporations and corrupt politicians have taken control, turning the once impartial judiciary into a tool for the elite to use for their own gain."

2024 Russian Disinformation Activity

United States Attorney's Office
Southern District of New York

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Justice.gov > U.S. Attorneys > Southern District of New York > Press Releases > Two RT Employees Indicted For Covertly Funding And Directing U.S. Company That Published Thousands Of Videos In Furtherance Of Russian Interests

PRESS RELEASE

Two RT Employees Indicted For Covertly Funding And Directing U.S. Company That Published Thousands Of Videos In Furtherance Of Russian Interests



Fake Profile Used by RT Employees to Fund Tennessee Company,

2024-2025 Russian Disinformation Activity



Example of Russia's "Doppelganger" campaign. Source: Microsoft Threat Analysis Center (MTAC)

Operations by PRC

"Microsoft continued to identify AI-generated memes targeting the United States that amplified controversial domestic issues and criticized the current administration"

- Microsoft Threat Intelligence, April 2024



Figure 8: Storm-1376 posts conspiratorial content within days of the outbreak of the wildfires, alleging the fires were the result of US government testing of a "meteorological weapon." These posts were frequently accompanied with AI-generated photos of massive fires.

OpenAI finds more Chinese groups using ChatGPT for malicious purposes

- ***Reuters, June 6, 2025***

"[The PRC] aims to sow doubts about U.S. leadership, undermine democracy, and extend Beijing's influence."

- ODNI Annual Threat Assessment, February 2024

Iranian Disinformation Activity



Figure 2: June 7 article criticizing Donald Trump published in one of the covert network's outlets, Nio Thinker.

"A more recently created site, Nio Thinker, first began publishing in late October 2023. The site's early publications focused on the Israel-Hamas conflict, but have increasingly shifted to the US elections in recent months. Its content caters to liberal audiences and includes sarcastic, long-winded articles insulting Trump."

- Microsoft Threat Intelligence, April 2024

OpenAI deactivates ChatGPT accounts linked to Iranian disinformation operation

- ***Axios, August 16, 2024***

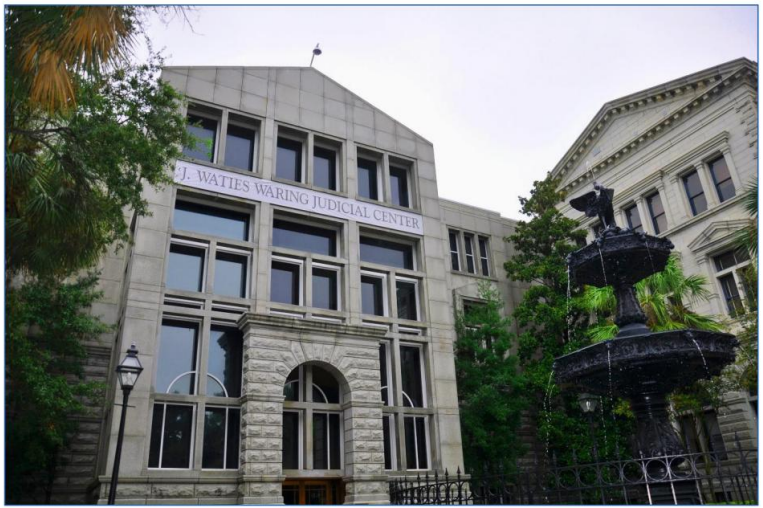
Autonomous AI Influence Campaigns

Iran and China Create First-of-Their-Kind Autonomous A.I. Influence Campaigns

The countries, along with Israeli firms, combined Chinese open-source A.I. models and A.I. agents for the campaigns, foreshadowing future online manipulation.



Foreign Disinformation Threat

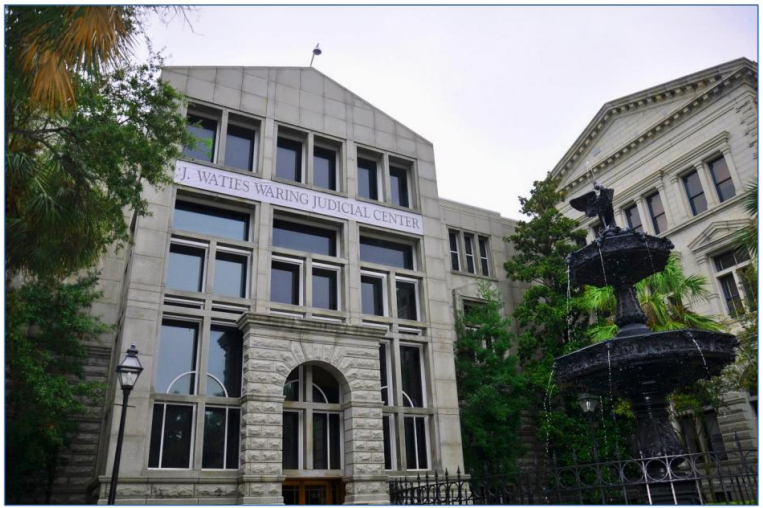


J. Waties Waring Judicial Center, Charleston, South Carolina

2024 Year End Report on the Federal Judiciary

"In recent years, hostile foreign state actors have accelerated their efforts to attack all branches of our government, including the judiciary. In some instances, these outside agents feed false information into the marketplace of ideas. For example, bots distort judicial decisions, using fake or exaggerated narratives to foment discord within our democracy."

Chief Justice Roberts on Threats to Judicial Independence



J. Waties Waring Judicial Center, Charleston, South Carolina

2024 Year End Report on the Federal Judiciary

(1) violence
(2) intimidation
(3) disinformation
(4) threats to defy lawfully entered judgments

Threats to Judges



NATIONAL

Police arrest an armed man outside Justice Kavanaugh's house

UPDATED JUNE 8, 2022 · 2:20 PM ET

By NPR Washington Desk



Associate Justice Brett Kavanaugh stands during a group photo at the Supreme Court in Washington last year.
Erin Schaff/AP

Women judges see rising threats to their work — and clear paths to defusing them

Current and former federal judges want to help Americans better understand the judiciary while enhancing security.



Source: The 19th
September 15, 2025

Threats to Judges

Fake pizza orders sent to judges seen as threat to judicial safety

- *Washington Post, May 11, 2025*

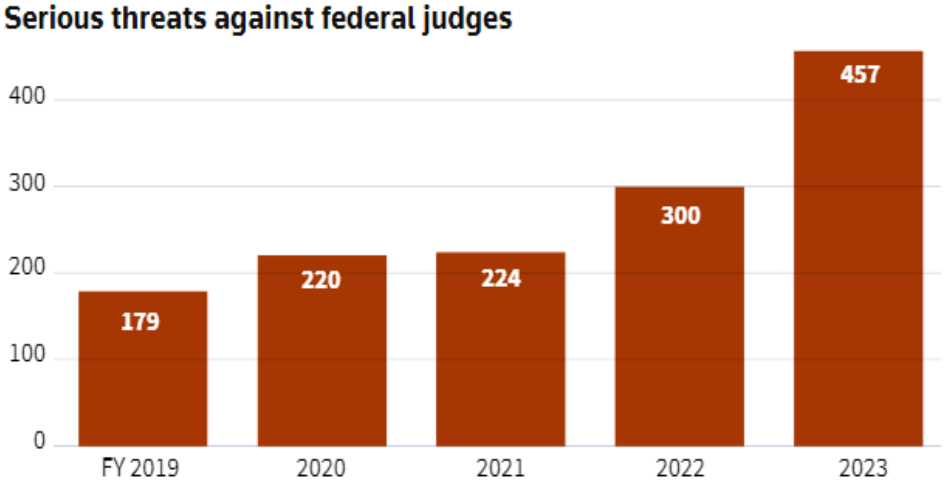
A REUTERS SPECIAL REPORT

Judges in Trump-related cases face unprecedented wave of threats

- *Reuters, February 29, 2024*

Second US judge who ruled against Trump faces Republican impeachment bid

- *Reuters, February 24, 2025*



In the past three years, the number of threats directed specifically at federal judges and deemed serious enough by U.S. Marshals to investigate has more than doubled. Chart depicts fiscal years from Oct. 1, 2018-Sept. 30, 2023. Source: U.S. Marshals Service

Marshals' Data Shows Spike in Threats Against Federal Judges

- *New York Times, May 27, 2025*

Threats to Election Officials

[The defendant] threatened the lives of multiple public servants on social media. Among other threats, he allegedly claimed that it was 'time' to put two state election officials to death and that he was obligated to 'put a bullet' in the head of a Colorado state judge.

- ***Principal Deputy Assistant AG Nicole M. Argentieri - August 26, 2024***



Suspicious mail containing white powder sent to election offices in at least 16 states

- ***ABC News, September 17, 2024***

Assassinations and Assassination Attempts



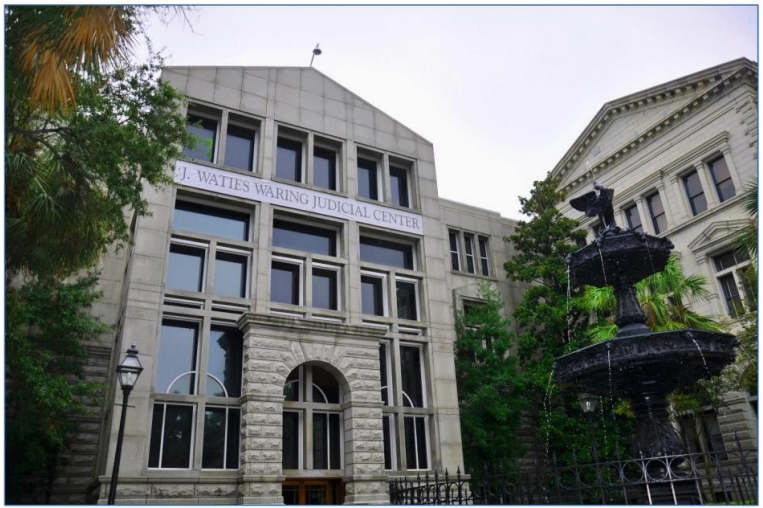
Assassinations and Assassination Attempts



Political Violence Around Elections



Chief Justice Roberts on Threats to Judicial Independence



J. Waties Waring Judicial Center, Charleston, South Carolina

2024 Year End Report on the Federal Judiciary

(1) violence
(2) intimidation
(3) disinformation
(4) threats to defy lawfully entered judgments



"[T]here is a risk that, in a sincere effort to preserve the institution and avoid a constitutional crisis, the Court may seek to sidestep a significant confrontation with the executive branch in the face of recent threats to ignore court orders. This would itself reflect a devastating lack of independence and de facto create the very constitutional crisis and damage to the public's trust that the chief justice presumably seeks to avoid."
March 7, 2025

Americans' Views on Checks on Presidential Power

69% of respondents to a Annenberg Public Policy Center Survey believe the president should obey a Supreme Court ruling, even if he believes it prevents him from protecting the country from a terrorist attack. *(APPC, Apr. 2025)*

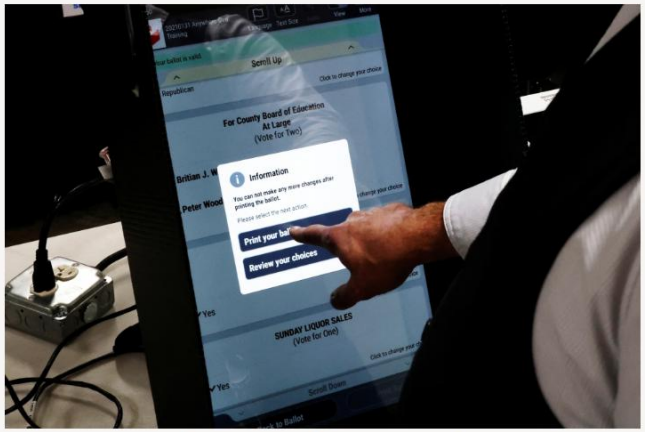


"[W]hile there often are valid constitutional considerations in these cases, judges have demonstrated competence to consider sensitive and complex issues of national security. **Appropriate judicial review strengthens national security**, and there are risks inherent in undue deference."

ELECTIONS AND VOTING

Are the U.S. Midterms Vulnerable to Foreign Meddling?

The Trump administration has scaled back efforts to limit foreign disinformation and misinformation in U.S. elections even as Russia, China, and Iran continue to push secret influence campaigns.



Bartow County Elections Supervisor Joseph Kirk demonstrates how to use a new voting machine ahead of the 2026 midterms in Cartersville, Georgia, September 2, 2026. Brian Snyder/Reuters

PUBLISHED
October 7, 2026 8:48 p.m.



James M. Lindsay CFR EXPERT
Mary and David Boies Distinguished Senior Fellow in U.S. Foreign Policy

“Foreign influence operations and foreign interference efforts are two different things.”

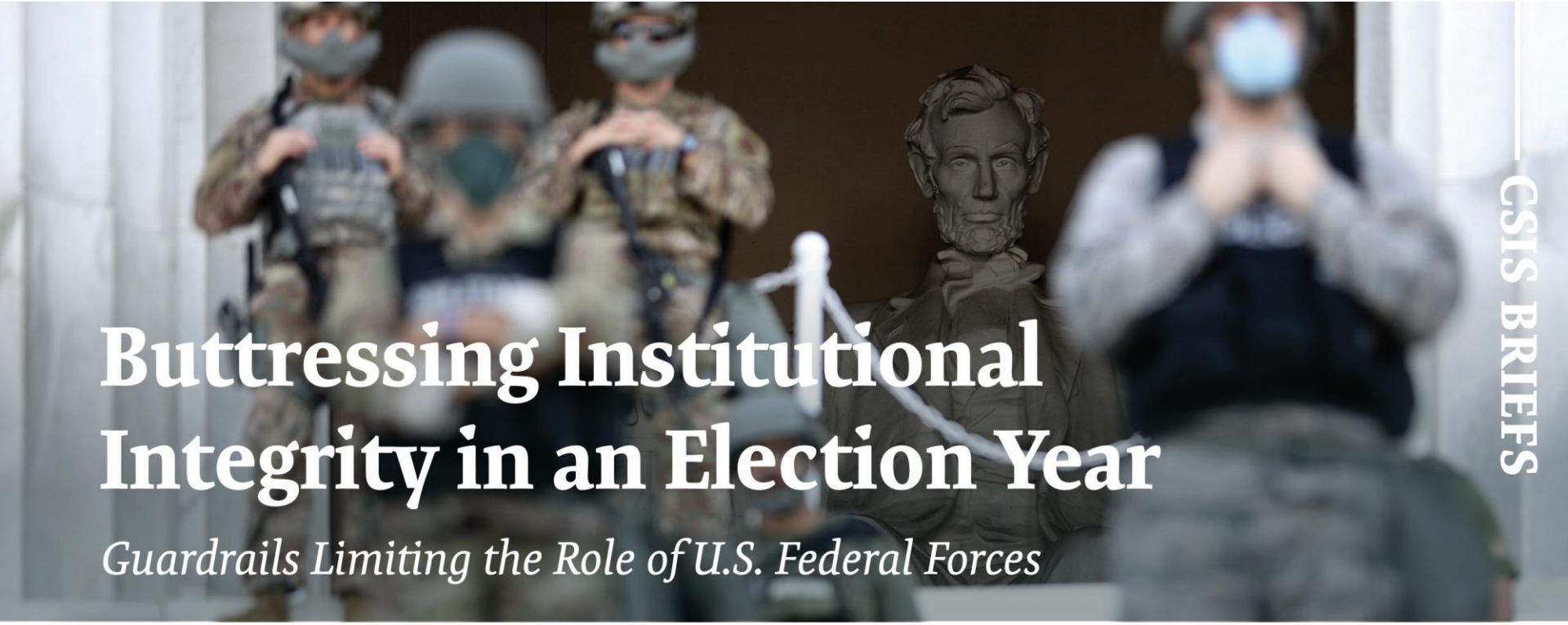
“Foreign influence operations have a long history; election interference operations do not.”

“No evidence exists that any foreign government has ever run a substantial election interference operation, notwithstanding the allegations of conspiracy theorists.”

Upcoming November Midterm Elections

"Classified U.S. intelligence assessments from recent months have determined that the Kremlin has again authorized a digital influence campaign to peddle content across social media in hopes of seeding or amplifying domestic divisions around the election season, the officials said. The assessments did not find evidence of attempts to take aim at voting machinery in a way that could compromise the actual voting process, the officials added."

-Dustin Volz, "Russia Aims to Inject Chaos Into Elections, U.S. Intelligence Finds," *The New York Times*, September 18, 2026



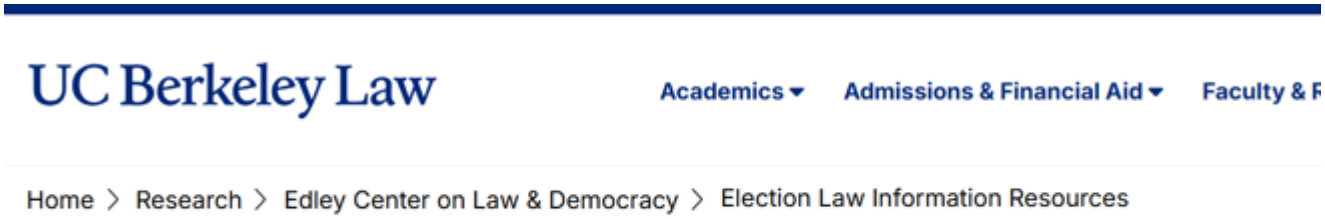
CSIS BRIEFS

Buttressing Institutional Integrity in an Election Year

Guardrails Limiting the Role of U.S. Federal Forces

By Devi Nair, Melissa Dalton, and Suzanne Spaulding

OCTOBER 2020

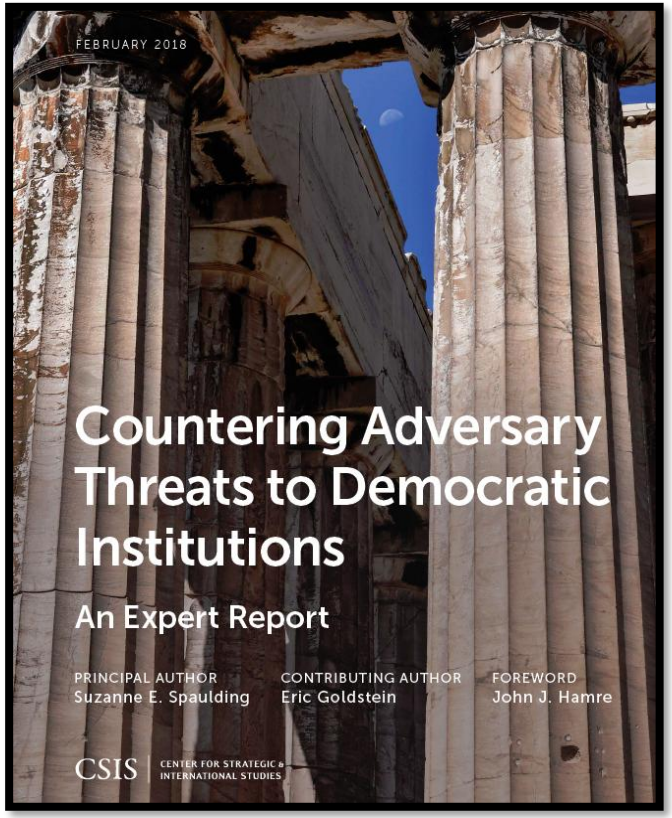


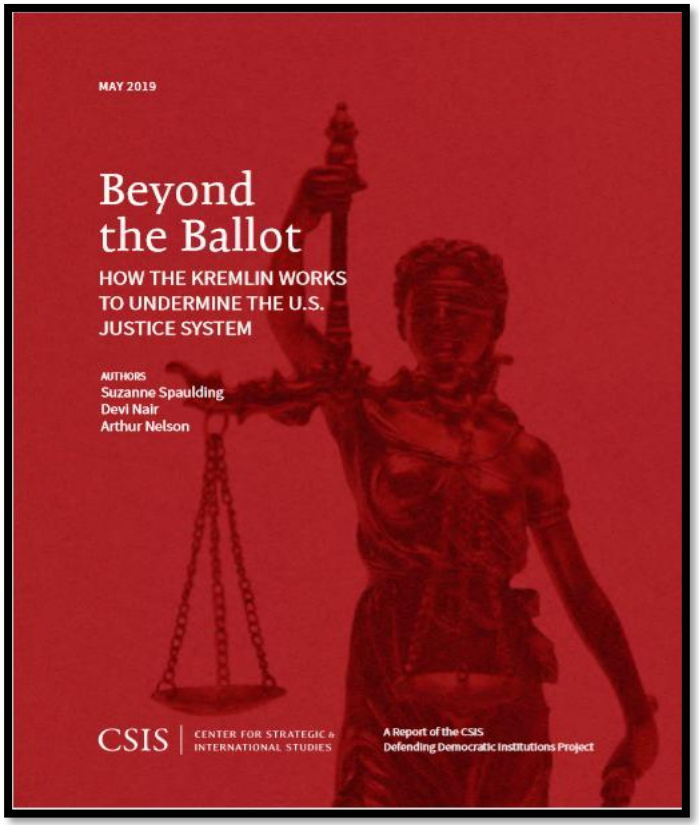
- election-specific considerations for scrutinizing a proposed warrant and possible modifications to reduce election disruptions;
- a sample "Attachment B" warrant scoping template;
- a guide on when and how a magistrate judge might *sua sponte* request amicus briefing on novel legal questions raised by an election-related warrant;
- election-specific questions a magistrate judge may want to consider when evaluating probable cause; and
- a high-level guide to key election administration processes and events for which state and local election officials are responsible in a general election.

“Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women; when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can save it.”
--Learned Hand

"The Spirit of Liberty" *speech, delivered on May 21, 1944, in Central Park, New York City, during an* ***"I Am an American Day"***

DDI Reports


FEBRUARY 2018
Countering Adversary Threats to Democratic Institutions
An Expert Report
PRINCIPAL AUTHOR
Suzanne E. Spaulding
CONTRIBUTING AUTHOR
Eric Goldstein
FOREWORD
John J. Hamre
CSIS
CENTER FOR STRATEGIC & INTERNATIONAL STUDIES


MAY 2019
Beyond the Ballot
HOW THE KREMLIN WORKS TO UNDERMINE THE U.S. JUSTICE SYSTEM
AUTHORS
Suzanne Spaulding
Devi Nair
Arthur Nelson
CSIS
CENTER FOR STRATEGIC & INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
A Report of the CSIS Defending Democratic Institutions Project

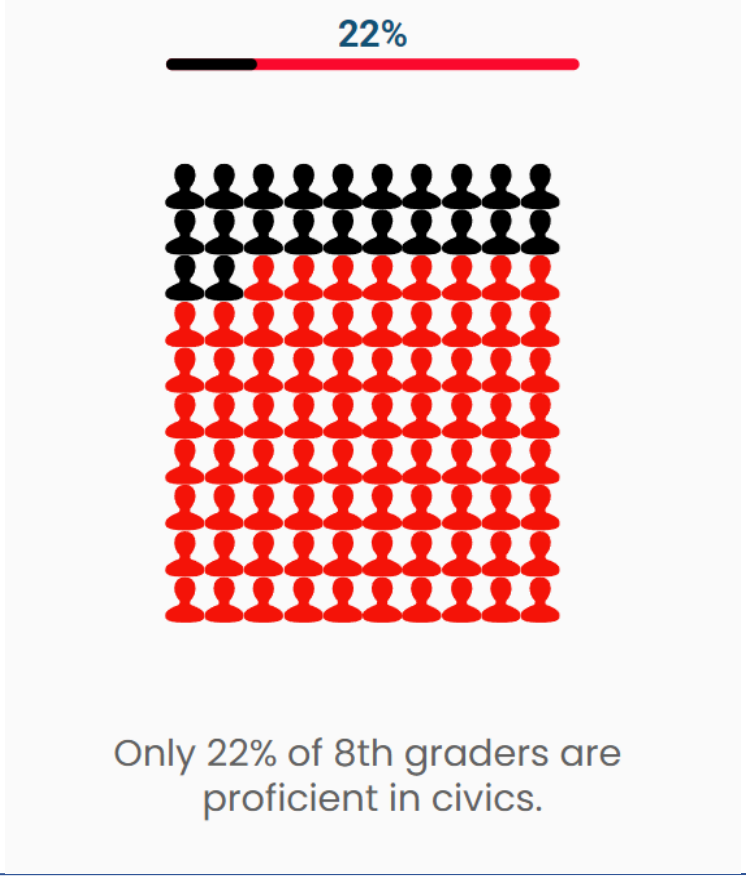
Defending Democratic Institutions Project

- Continued research and awareness raising
- Cybersecurity and disinformation training for judges and courts
- **The promotion of civics/civics education as a national security imperative**

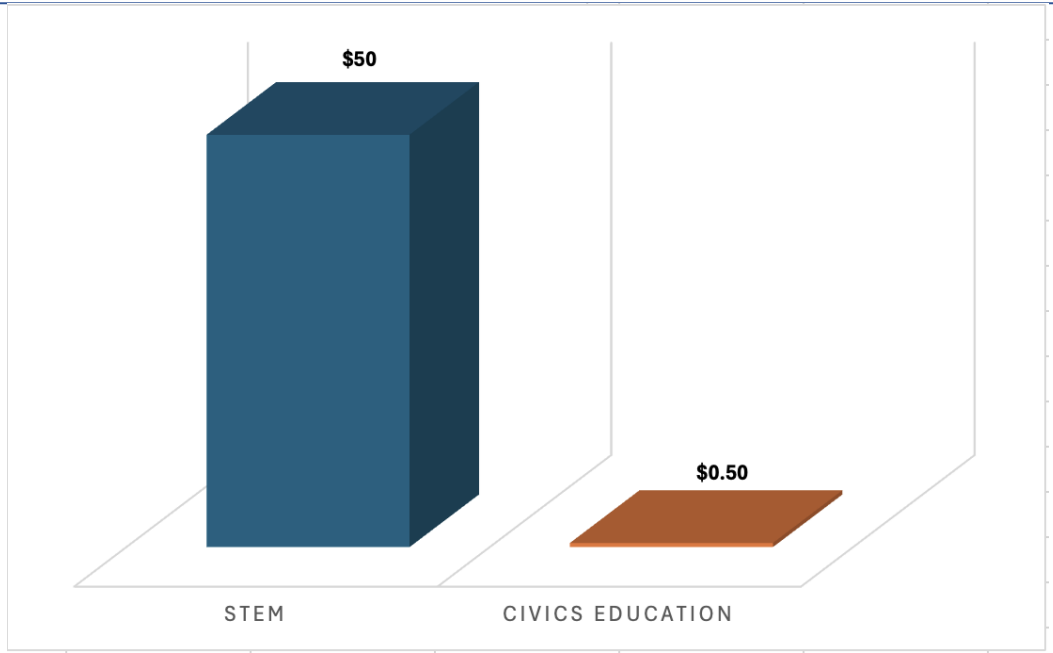
How Civics Addresses the Disinformation Threat



State of Civic Education and Civic Awareness



Federal Funding for Civics (2024)



Congress appropriated $23 million to improve civics and history education as part of the year-end FY24 spending bill, matching the FY23 allocation and tripling the $7.75 million provided in FY22.

(see CivXNow press release, 03/28/24)

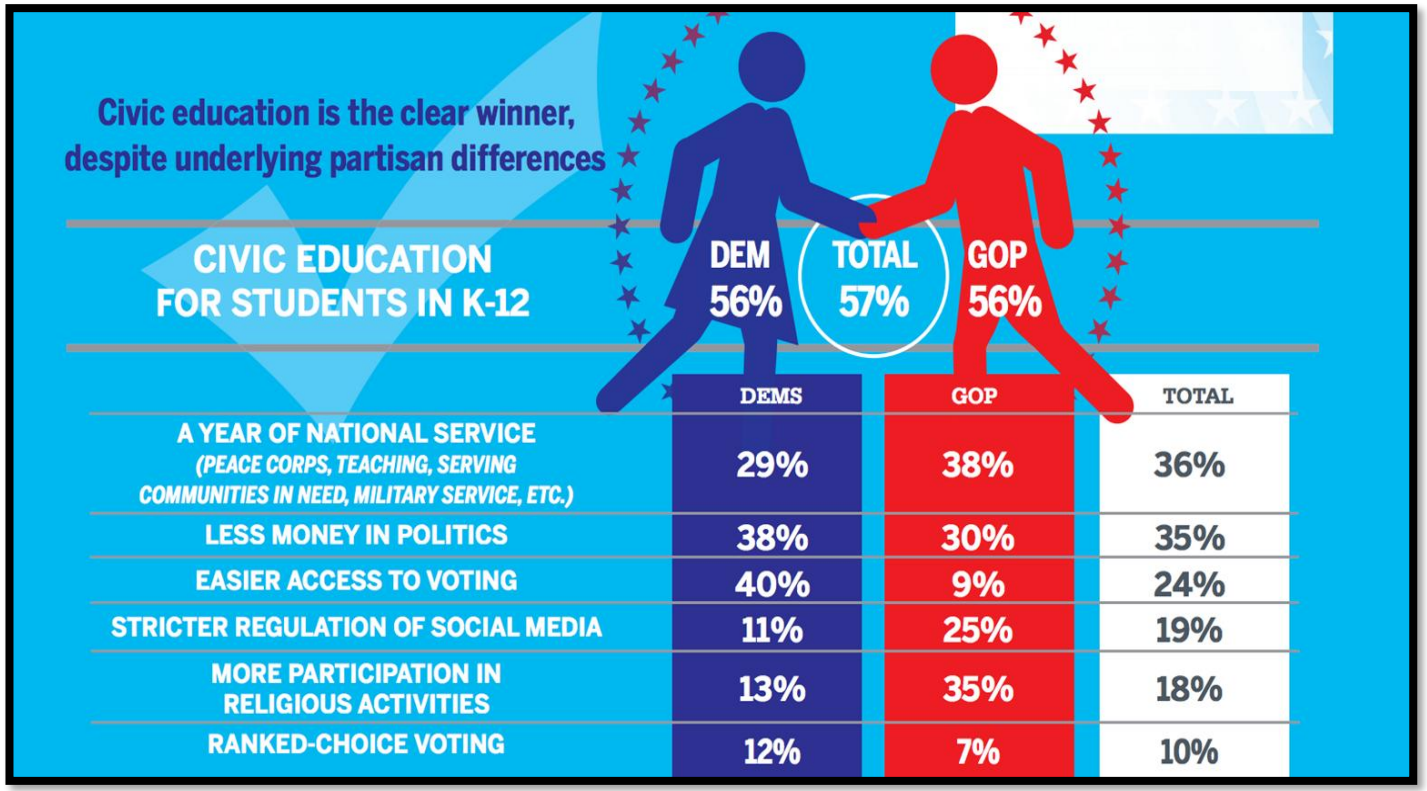
State of Civic Education and Civic Awareness

In response to a 2021 survey that asked, “Do you think it is ever justified for citizens to take violent action against the government, or is it never justified?”, **34% of respondents** said it was justified.

- *Washington Post-University of Maryland, Dec. 2021*

A New Sputnik Moment

What would have the **MOST** positive and meaningful impact on strengthening the American identity?



CSIS Civics Strategic Dialogue



"We don't have a right to be bystanders."
~Justice Sonia Sotomayor









The Role of Business in Sustaining Democracy







Civics in STEM and the Tech Sector

"[T]echnology has become a multi-disciplinary activity and every engineer at a company like Microsoft needs a bigger dose of the liberal arts and civics in particular…and what is true at a place like Microsoft is true across the tech sector and is true for higher education and even high school writ large… at the end of the day the heart of our society is our democratic foundation and therefore civics education always has to be at the heart of this multidisciplinary approach."

- Brad Smith, Interview with Suzanne Spaulding, January 19, 2021

“Knowledge about the ideas embodied in the Constitution and the ways in which it shaper our lives is not passed down from generation to generation through the gene pool; it must be learned anew by each generation”



Sandra Day O’Connor

DEMOCRACY RISING COLLABORATIVE AND
KEEP OUR REPUBLIC PRESENT

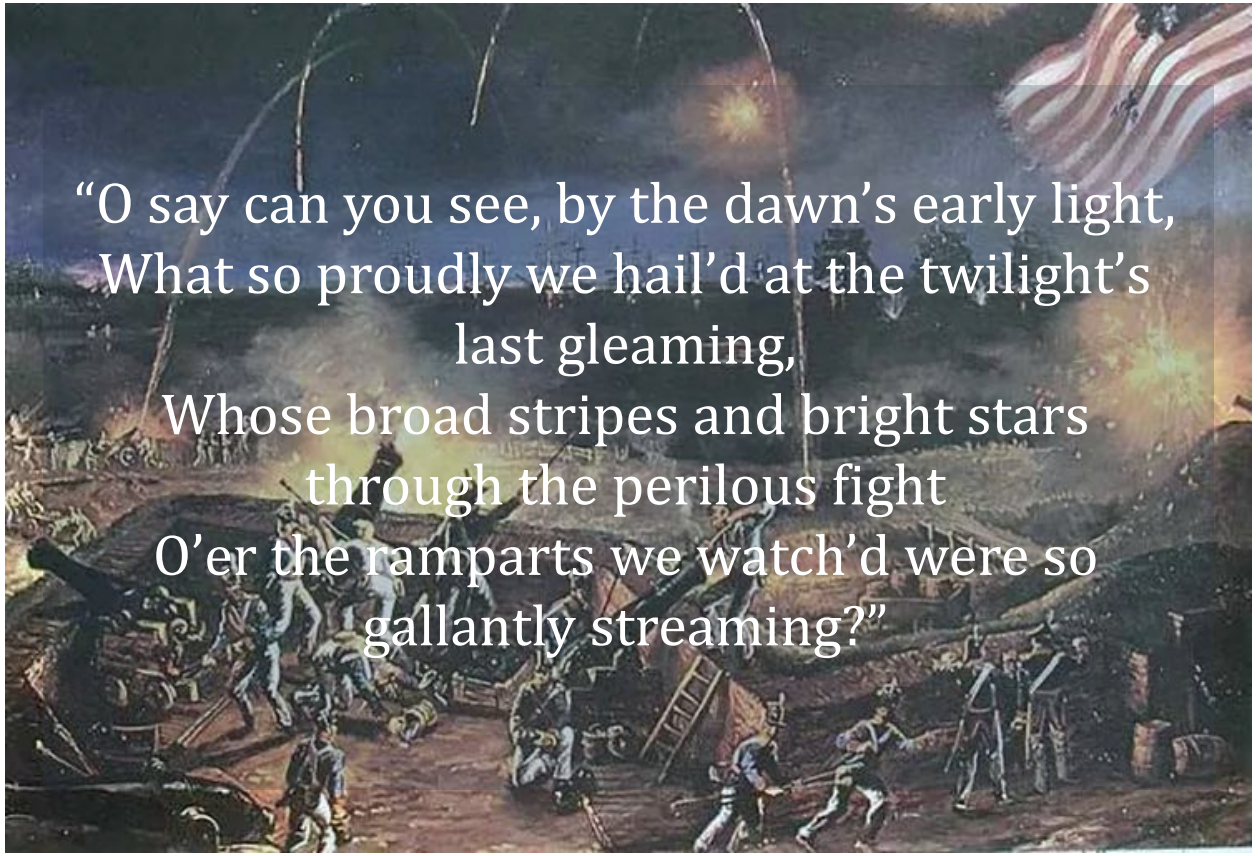
JUSTICE IN MOTION

Celebrating 250 years of Self-Governance

JULY 2026 | PENNSYLVANIA • OHIO • MICHIGAN

In the days following America's 250th birthday, a group of retired judges, lawyers, and civic leaders boarded a bus in Pittsburgh and embarked on a week-long journey through diverse communities in the heartland — meeting Americans where they are to talk about why the Rule of Law matters to the American way of life.

The Star-Spangled Banner



“O say does that star-spangled banner yet wave

O’er the land of the free and the home of the brave?”

Francis Scott Key



For more information, please visit:

www.csis.org

In the search bar, filter by **'program'** and look up **'Defending Democratic Institutions'**