

PACS NEWS/OCTOBER 31, 2023

Polarization and Social Change Lab Announces Field Test Grant Winners

The [Polarization and Social Change Lab](#) (PaSCL) at Stanford PACS is pleased to announce the winners of its inaugural [Bridging Divides & Strengthening Democracy Field Test Grants](#).

Building on the findings from the [Strengthening Democracy Challenge](#), the unique grant program supports field tests of interventions designed to reduce support for undemocratic practices, partisan violence, and/or partisan animosity. The Strengthening Democracy Challenge—[one of the largest experiments on American politics ever conducted](#)—crowdsourced more than 250 interventions aiming to improve these outcomes and tested [25 of the most promising on a diverse sample of more than 31,000 American partisans](#). Submitters to the Field Test Grant competition were asked to form teams of academic researchers and practitioners. These “hybrid” teams then proposed tests of the best performing interventions from the Strengthening Democracy Challenge out in the world, to assess the potential for the study’s results to have positive impact. The winners of the Field Test Grant competition will now put a select few of the most effective interventions to test in real-world settings.

“When we finished data collection for the Strengthening Democracy Challenge, we next wanted to figure out the best ways to drive the results to application out in the world, to see whether the knowledge we gained could in fact be put to good use to address problems like anti-democratic attitudes,” [Robb Willer](#), Director of PaSCL and Faculty Co-Director of Stanford PACS, said. “In thinking about the best way to do this, we wanted to not just look inward at the ideas from our own lab. We decided instead to look outward, to all the brilliant and committed folks working on these problems in the U.S. and beyond. We were blown away by how many proposals the competition produced, and we’re excited now to fund the four we determined were the most promising. It’s an honor to support such an all-star slate of academics and practitioners working in the polarization and democracy space.”

The four winning grantee projects and their principals include:

“Testing a Brief Video Intervention to Improve Respectful Conversations”



Mark Brandt
*Department of Psychology
Michigan State University*



Rev. Jerad Morey
Minnesota Council of Churches

This project will test the “Civility storytelling” intervention from the Strengthening Democracy Challenge through the Minnesota Council of Churches’ Respectful Conversations series. This storytelling intervention consists of sharing advice on how to bridge divides, along with personal stories showcasing how democracy promotes and allows for diverse views and experiences. MCC’s Respectful Conversations is a facilitated reflective structured dialogue experience for groups of 20-200 individuals to build empathy and strengthen relationships in the face of polarizing conflict. Developed in 2011, Respectful Conversations has engaged more than 8,000 participants from congregations, institutions of higher education, community organizations, professional associations, nonprofit boards, and municipalities. The project team will assess the intervention’s effectiveness in terms of participants’ feelings of affective polarization, intergroup empathy, and confidence in having cross-group conversations in the future.

Mark Brandt is an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology at Michigan State University and a member of the Minority Politics Lab in the College of Social Sciences. Rev. Jerad Morey is the Director of Strategic Relationships at the Minnesota Council of Churches and has led the Respectful Conversations Project for 10 years.

“Minnesota Council of Churches exists to manifest unity and build the common good,” Rev. Morey said. “We are thrilled for this exciting partnership with Dr. Brandt and PaSCL, what it will mean for communities who seek to strengthen love of neighbor, and how the learnings will contribute to peacebuilding in our democracy.”

“Can the Threat of Democratic Collapse Engage Young People with Democracy?”



Katherine Clayton
*Department of Political Science
Stanford University*



Debra Louison Lavoy
Reality Team



Ian Simmons
Foundation for Civic Leadership



Simon Thompson
Foundation for Civic Leadership



Nancy Noble
Reality Team

Modeled after the “[democratic collapse threat](#)” intervention from the Strengthening Democracy Challenge, this project will test a series of short videos that convey the causes and consequences of democratic collapse and provide recommendations for safeguarding democracy. Through Instagram ads and focus groups with young adults, the project team will test the videos’ effectiveness for increasing awareness about potential threats to democracy, increasing beliefs about the importance of democracy, and stimulating engagement with democracy through various forms of civic activism. [Reality Team](#), a nonprofit organization that uses the tools of digital marketing to reduce the influence of disinformation on social media, will support the Instagram ads field experiment. [Foundation for Civic Leadership](#), a nonprofit dedicated to engaging the next generation in democracy, will host the focus groups.

[Katie Clayton](#) is a PhD candidate in the Department of Political Science at Stanford University and a recipient of the NSF Graduate Research Fellowship. [Debra Louison Lavoy](#), Reality Team’s founder, is a software engineer, marketing executive, and counter-disinformation professional. [Nan Noble](#) is a program director and strategy adviser with Reality Team, and brings over 20 years of experience helping leaders around the world implement visionary programs. [Ian Simmons](#) is the Founder of [Democracy House](#) and President of the Foundation for Civic Leadership. [Simon Thompson](#) is the Policy Director of Democracy House, where he leads projects to advance student voting policy and build civic engagement networks.

“This project is an extraordinary opportunity to evaluate whether the insights gleaned from our survey-based work in the Strengthening Democracy Challenge can be used to engage young people with democracy in the real world—a priority for democratic stability across generations,” Clayton said.

“Democracy through Community: Local Efforts to Reduce Polarization”



Daniel Markovits
Columbia University



Liz Joyner
The Village Square



Aaron Jay Christensen
Columbia University



Andrew Ifedapo Thompson
George Washington University

This project will test the “[correcting democracy misperception](#)” intervention through a field experiment in collaboration with [The Village Square](#), a community-based civic organization in Florida. The Village Square leads a variety of programming centered around civility and community-building (especially among political opposites), including events designed to foster dialogue, encourage disagreement, and increase empathy. The project team will test the intervention through a town hall-style virtual event, hosted by The Village Square, in which a quiz game, politicians, and citizens describe high levels of democratic commitment among both Republicans and Democrats. The team will assess the effectiveness of the event in reducing anti-democratic misperceptions among participants, while gathering corresponding learnings about the effectiveness of the intervention on event newcomers, incentivizing engagement, and more.

[Liz Joyner](#) is Founder and President of [The Village Square](#). [Daniel Markovits](#) is a PhD candidate in the Columbia University Department of Political Science who studies American politics and public opinion. [Aaron Jay Christensen](#) is a PhD candidate in the Columbia University Department of Political Science studying state-society relations, the political economy of development, and political behavior. [Andrew Ifedapo Thompson](#) is an Assistant Professor at George Washington University whose research examines how threat and anxiety shift attitudes about American democracy.

“American Depolarization Network”



Julia Minson
*Kennedy School of Government
Harvard University*



Chris Higgins
*Kennedy School of Government
Harvard University*

This project will test the effectiveness of two related interventions as scalable de-polarization tools: 1) the “outpartisans’ willingness to learn” intervention from the Strengthening Democracy Challenge; and 2) “conversational receptiveness,” the use of language to demonstrate one’s engagement with opposing views. The project team will build a web-based system that will allow individuals trained in these techniques to email large numbers of randomly-selected out-party Americans with messages expressing a desire to learn about the recipient’s point of view and the reasoning behind their beliefs. Through follow-up surveys, the team will measure recipients’ attitudes toward members of the opposing political party, and their willingness to engage in future contact with them. The team will recruit its initial pool of participants from politically and demographically diverse users from established de-polarization organizations.

Julia Minson is an Associate Professor of Public Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, with research interests in conflict, negotiations, and judgment and decision making. Chris Higgins is a Research Associate at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government and the manager of the Minson Conflict and Collaboration Lab.

To ensure continued knowledge building and sharing, all field test grantees will produce papers based on their research and submit them to academic journals. PaSCL will share updates on the grantees’ findings and next steps for continued research and application of these promising strategies for bridging divides and strengthening democracy.

“The Bridging Divides & Strengthening Democracy Field Test Grants is the next step in our quest for generating practical knowledge for reducing anti-democratic attitudes and partisan animosity,” Jan Voelkel, one of the co-leaders of the Strengthening Democracy Challenge, said. “Through crowdsourcing and experimental testing, we have identified four highly promising ideas that will now be implemented in the field by collaborations of leading scholars and organizations. We hope that our approach will be a useful template for intervening on pressing societal issues and will be further refined as we integrate the insights from our inaugural awardees.”

The Bridging Divides & Strengthening Democracy Field Test Grants are made possible through the generous support of Stanford Impact Labs.

Stanford Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society 559 Nathan Abbott Way Stanford, CA 94305

© Stanford Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society 2010-2024

[Privacy](#)