Collaboration for Research on Elections, Citizens, and Democracy

Target Category for Submission: "Existing and Emerging Excellence"

Cluster Leader: Dr. Martha Kropf, Professor, Department of Political Science & Public Administration, Core Faculty, Public Policy Ph.D. Program

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Participating Programs and Departments:

Department of Political Science & Public Administration

Public Policy Ph.D. Program (PPOL)

Department of Sociology

Department of Communication Studies

Key words: representative democracy, elections, inclusion, socialization, computational social science

Executive Summary,

The January 6, 2021 insurrection shocked the world and caused Americans to question whether our democracy would continue. The health of our democracy depends on well-run, accessible elections, transparent and accurate information, and opportunities to engage in society. Citizens must feel they have a voice in government through the ballot and in the process. These factors help citizens know the government is legitimate, maintain feelings of confidence in the electoral system, and trust government at the federal, state, and local level, even in the face of occasional challenges. The scholars involved in this area of Existing and Emerging Excellence analyze three aspects of our political system, which help us grapple with the question of democratic health: local and state election administration, socialization, civic engagement and public values, and political elites and institutions. Not only has most of this work been nationally recognized with publication in major journals, awards, and funding, but there are opportunities for expansion of research, collaboration, and our collective reputation.

First, putting election administration under a microscope is important to understanding the immediate problem of citizen belief in fraud. At the level of state and local election administration, members of our group analyze fair election administration. Drs. Kropf, Mohr, and McGowan (formerly Shepherd) are currently examining how the amount spent on the nuts and bolts of elections affect public opinion about election fraud and confidence that one's ballot was counted as cast, both common measures of the legitimacy of elections.

Second, we address public knowledge of and opportunities to engage in the political process and society. Do individuals have an adequate amount of accurate information (Drs. Giersch, Kropf, Stearns; Dr. Batista; Dr. Dai)? Do they have access to quality education (Drs. Giersch, Stearns)? Do individuals have opportunities to volunteer and engage in their communities (Dr. Piatak, PPOL student, Ian Mikkelsen)? Do citizens who want to vote have access to the ballot (Drs. Kropf, Davis)?. Do citizens vote or even know how an election operates (Dr. Kropf)? How does public service motivation influence engagement and shape policy preferences (Dr. Piatak)? Do people feel they can hold governments accountable for promised services (Drs. Leland, Piatak, Mohr)? **What information strategies do authoritarian or populist leaders use to manipulate the public (Dr. Dai)? How does belonging to certain bodies (or not belonging) serve as a tool for political or authoritarian control (Dr. Davis)?**

Third, we address the voice of the public compared to that of elites. Do people feel they have a voice in national policymaking, or do national institutions of campaign finance shut out their voice (Drs. Heberlig and McGowan)? **Does our representative democracy represent the will of the citizens rather than those willing and able to donate large sums of money (Dr. Heberlig)?**

As the committee will see, the subject matter is—and has been—ideal for collaboration in the Charlotte community and hits on at least two key pillars of the National Science Foundation's Big Ideas program: Harnessing the Data Revolution and Mid-Scale Research Infrastructure. A number of foundations also support research on populism/authoritarianism, civic engagement and election administration.

The subject matter is important, but this interdisciplinary group also utilizes cutting-edge methodology, ranging from computational social science to experimental laboratory social research and from qualitative small "n" research to the use of sophisticated statistical methodologies. We also leverage theoretical frameworks to not only advance theory, but also to inform practical politics and practice, and to advance engagement. For example, the theory of social capital emphasizes the importance of community interaction for understanding both formal and informal norms for operation of democracy.

Evidence of Strength and Excellence
The core of the individuals involved with this cluster are involved with the interdisciplinary Public Policy Ph.D. Program as faculty or graduates of the program. The individuals involved have maintained a collegial relationship. Thus, incidental interactions, brown bag research presentations, and even social lunches have led to research grants and publications. Members of the cluster have produced much important scholarship, earning national recognition, awards, and funding. At the current time, our active work is essentially broken into three general areas: 1.) election administration, 2.) socialization, civic engagement and public values, and 3) elites (candidates/politicians) and campaign finance rules.

Election Administration. Led by Dr. Martha Kropf, this collaboration focuses on analyzing various aspects of election administration (nuts and bolts of elections) and reforms. This group includes Dr. Zach Mohr and Dr. Mary Jo McGowan. The current focus, the analysis of election expenditures, has emerged because—to our knowledge—there was **no** data from election jurisdictions all over the country that allowed scholars to understand how much each of the United States spends for election administration. This group earned two "New Initiatives Grants in Election Science" which allowed it to fund two Master of Public Administration students interested in budget and finance careers. Along with the data, the collaboration has yielded two top-tier articles (The *American Journal of Political Science* is the #1 general interest journal in Political Science; *Public Administration Review* is the #1 journal in Public Administration).[1] The group is also in the process of writing a book tentatively titled, *A Republic If You Can Afford It: How Much Does it Cost to Administer an Election?* (R&R on a contract with Cambridge University Press, the top-rated book publisher in Political Science). Importantly, such research can help reveal racial inequalities in voting outcomes.

Dr. Kropf has conducted research on election reforms for many years, including having earned a National Science Foundation grant for the study of the graphic design of ballots to minimize citizen mistakes. Dr. Kropf regularly teaches a service learning course tied to helping the Mecklenburg County Election Board. She also works with groups such as Democracy NC to analyze observational data they collect in their role as an election watchdog, particularly in minority communities.

Socialization, Civic Engagement, and Public Values. Led by Dr. Jason Giersch, this group fosters collaborations across political science, public administration, and sociology to produce research about not only civic participation, but also, the role of educational institutions and policies in students' development of political identities and preparing them for civic participation. This group has also examined opportunities and barriers for civic participation.

One strand of research includes questions about teacher quality, gender and racial identities and inequalities, and the widening ideological gap between political parties. This collaboration includes Dr. Elizabeth Stearns and Dr. Kropf. A sample publication includes: Giersch, Kropf, Stearns (2020). "Unequal Returns to Education: How Women Teachers Narrow the Gender Gap in Political Knowledge among Students." *The Journal of Politics*.[2]

Dr. Giersch has recently investigated the question of education vs. indoctrination. He has fielded experiments with the Public Opinion Learning and Sentiment Lab (POLS Lab; directed by Dr. Mohr) concerning politically biased professors and how students respond. Dr. Giersch also intends to examine how taking a standard high school civics course affects students' political ideology.

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[1] InCites Journal Citation Reports, 2019.
[2] At the present time, Journal of Politics is rated 4th place in terms of general interest political science journals.

Dr. Jaclyn Piatak, Dr. Zachary Mohr, and Dr. Suzanne Leland have worked extensively to examine what level of government citizens hold accountable for inadequate public services, an issue far too common given our current pandemic requiring collaboration across sectors and levels of government. Drs. Piatak, Leland, and Chattopadhyay examine the influence of public trust on which level of government should be responsible for different policy areas, such as their recent article in *Governance* (IF: 3). Dr. Piatak's work also examines civic engagement and has received a grant to examine representation and inclusion in associations ($7,500). She just published a Cambridge University Press book entitled, *Public Service Motivation and Public Opinion: Examining Antecedents and Attitudes.*

Dr. Fred Batista examines the ability of citizens to manage fake news, having examined how media coverage of COVID-19 affected political attitudes (with Facebook funding). Dr. Yaoyao Dai works on the supply side of information manipulation and the consequences of exposure to such manipulation, particularly domestic and foreign propaganda, disinformation campaigns, and populist rhetoric.

Drs. Kropf and Christine Davis have collaborated with Atrium Health and other medical researchers to examine barriers to political participation for those with brain and spinal cord injuries. This body of research has been funded by multiple grants from the National Institutes of Health and the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, and has provided funding for graduate student research, including Julia Snow's MA Thesis in Communication Studies, as well as Jessica Link's political science senior thesis. The most recent publication that has come out of this collaboration: Hammond, FM, CS Davis, MA Hirsch, JM Snow, ME Kropf, L Schur, D Kruse, and A Ball. 2021. "Qualitative Examination of Voting Empowerment and Participation Among People Living With Traumatic Brain Injury." *Archives of Physical Medicine*. (In press).

Last but not least, Dr. Davis analyzes identity, the juxtaposition of 'the body politic' with 'body politics,' or how belonging of certain bodies (or not belonging) is a tool for power and control. Her most recent book, co-edited, is called *The Personal is Political: Body Politics in a Trump World* (Brill Press, 2020).

Campaign Finance and Political Parties Group. Led by Dr. Eric Heberlig, this group focuses on the institutions and the rules that might impair the voice of regular citizens. This cluster analyzes the complex set of rules governing campaign finance and the minefields therein. Dr. Heberlig has also been a leader in providing experiential learning for UNC Charlotte students through the 49er Democracy Experience, and he is the faculty advisor for the North Carolina Student Legislature (recall media coverage of his students serving in the North Carolina General Assembly).

Dr. Heberlig's research seeks to understand flows of political money, and how citizens perceive political money. He published a book with top political science book publisher University of Michigan Press (*Congressional Parties, Institutional Ambition, and the Financing of Majority Control Citizens*). Dr. Heberlig is making plans to analyze large datasets created by campaign finance donations over many candidates and election cycles with Dr. Ben Radford. Dr. McGowan analyzes how written rules affect the ability and willingness of citizens to run for Office at the state level. Her most recent book is *Campaign Finance Complexity: Before Campaigning Retain an Attorney* (Lexington Books, 2018).

Drs. Heberlig and Leland examine political party conventions and the site selection process and how it affects the branding of a city in *American Cities and the Politics of Party Conventions* (University of Albany Press, 2017). Current work leverages the siting of two party conventions in Charlotte to interact with and interview city elites.

Alignment with Regional and National Priorities

A healthy representative democracy reinforces and bolsters outspoken, experimental, and prolific researchers in all disciplines. In that spirit, we maintain that before UNC Charlotte can create spectacular research, we have to ensure our democratic house is in order. We cannot leverage our strength in working together on big ideas until we ensure our democracy is transparent, fair, and legitimate and our population understands the political system.

Considering the university's mission statement, we engage with the Charlotte region to improve democratic outcomes for North Carolina. We work collaboratively with Charlotte community organizations and agencies such as the Mecklenburg County Election Board, The League of Women Voters, and Atrium Health. We have co-authored published research with both undergraduate and graduate students, providing engaging research experiences. Our alumni are populating the General Assembly—recall recent media stories praising Dr. Heberlig. Our graduates also work in federal, state, and local government agencies. Fostering citizen participation in government and giving back to the community through public service is a high priority.

Our research involves educational, social, and health outcomes. We have analyzed inequalities in civic education as well as inequalities in volunteering. We have worked to understand social outcomes such as political knowledge, public trust, voting, and other forms of civic engagement. Finally, we have worked to understand inclusion of those underrepresented not only so they can speak for health policy and outcomes, but also because democratic participation is itself, is associated with better health.

In terms of regional priorities, we look to the "Leading on Opportunity" report (which documented economic and educational inequalities, but also reported that social capital is a key cross-cutting factor). There is ample data that elections are not administered fairly depending on race, education, income, and disability status. We have seen the inequities brought by the digital divide, especially in terms of education. Without improving access to elections, information about the political process, and opportunities to engage, it will be difficult to begin to address economic and educational inequalities.

Our research has ties to national priorities within funding agencies such as the National Science Foundation. We envision "Big Ideas" for Harnessing the Data Revolution; we are currently working on creating large scale databases to allow individual citizens to track both election-related court cases and bureaucratic rules at the state level involving such subjects as ability to limit times and places where citizens may vote. We foresee the ability to track election quality problems using social media (tracking evidence of fraud, improperly-run polling places, and problems with obtaining ballots). Such efforts will become easier as locational devices allow us to locate Twitter comments.

We think that pilot and infrastructure development funding that we suggest will help not just our cluster, but also others. First, we would like to renew efforts to build "Your Voice CLT". Your Voice CLT was intended to build on-line respondent pools among Charlotte citizens and among those working in the non-profit and local government world in Charlotte. Second, we want to create funding infrastructures to allow the cluster researchers the ability to perform contract research for community organizations which can be run through the university. Finally, we fully support the full funding of the POLS Lab, as it has provided a platform for multiple projects our cluster has completed. It would be ideal if we could use the lab to conduct experiments for community organizations.

Cluster Members

Name & Title	Expertise
Cluster Leader: **Dr. Martha Kropf**, Professor of Political Science, Department of Political Science & Public Administration Core Faculty Member, Public Policy Ph.D. Program	Dr. Kropf analyzes election administration and political participation. She has broad and deep knowledge of the election system in the United States. She has many years of experience in public opinion research, including consulting on surveys pro-bono for Democracy North Carolina. She has connections to Atrium Health and with Mecklenburg County Election Board. Career-long experience with service learning projects
Dr. Fred Bastita, Assistant Professor of Political Science, Department of Political Science & Public Administration Member, Latin American Studies Program	Dr. Bastista analyzes information and misinformation; gender attitudes; Latin America. Examines public opinion and voting behavior in Latin America. His current projects are related to misinformation in Brazil, in collaboration with scholars in Brazil and the US, and funded by Facebook.
Dr. Yaoyao Dai, Assistant Professor of Political Science, Department of Political Science & Public Administration	Dr. Dai works on the supply side of information manipulation and the consequences of exposure to such manipulation, particularly domestic and foreign propaganda, disinformation campaigns, and populist rhetoric. She applies and develops various machine learning methods in measuring populism and other discursive strategies using texts as data. Her works on populism, and information manipulation in general, have important implications on the quality of democracy and democratic backsliding.
Dr. Christine Davis, Associate Professor, Department of Communications Studies	Dr. Davis specializes in Health Communication, with an emphasis on communication and disability; end-of-life communication; and communication, culture, and politics. Extensive experience working with Atrium Health, Carolinas Rehabilitation, and Levine Children's Hospital.
Dr. Jason Giersch, Assistant Professor of Political Science, Department of Political Science & Public Administration	Dr. Giersch studies political socialization and education policy. He taught high school social studies for fifteen years, moved to academia to pursue answers to questions about how young adults adopt political opinions and identities, the role civic education plays in a democratic society, and the various ways educational institutions and policies perpetuate social inequalities.

Dr. Eric Heberlig, Professor of Political Science Department of Political Science & Public Administration Faculty Director, North Carolina Student Legislature	Dr. Heberlig examines how campaign money affects political power and legislative activities in Congress, and how citizens' perceptions of the role of money affects their trust in the system and evaluation of candidates and political institutions. He also studies how political parties and interest groups mobilize citizens in campaigns for office and policy influence. He has been a leader with the 49er Democracy Experience, and has helped countless students gain education and experience in the political system, including several current state legislators.
Dr. Suzanne Leland, Professor of Political Science Core Member, Public Policy Ph.D. Program	Dr. Leland specializes in urban policy with current work focusing on Transportation Policy, but has also examined city/county consolidation, and conducted experiments concerning blame attribution. Dr. Leland will begin a second tenure as the Director of the Master of Public Administration Program in the summer of 2021.
Dr. Mary Jo McGowan (formerly Shepherd) Senior Lecturer in Political Science & Public Administration Faculty Sponsor, Model United Nations	Dr. McGowen is actively involved with the 49er Democracy Experience helping to organize and advocate for student political engagement activities on campus. Her research focus is on public policy relating to elections and running for office. She also studies policy complexity and its effect on outcome variables such as candidate decisions to run for office.
Dr. Zach Mohr, Associate Professor of Public Administration, Department of Political Science & Public Administration Affiliate Faculty, Public Policy Ph.D. Program	Dr. Mohr examines budgeting and finance issues. Particularly in local government. He directs the POLS Lab, which conducts experimental research in Public Administration, Public Policy, and Political Science. He has written on cost accounting and local government accountability.
Dr. Jaclyn Piatak, Associate Professor of Public Administration, Department of Political Science & Public Administration Core Faculty, Public Policy Ph.D. Program	Dr. Piatak's research centers on volunteering, civic engagement, and public and nonprofit management. Her work on public service motivation examines what draws people to serve in government, nonprofits, and in the community.
Dr. Ben Radford, Assistant Professor of Political Science and Public Policy, Department of Political Science & Public Administration Core Faculty, Public Policy Ph.D. Program	Dr. Radford studies quantitative approaches to social science with a particular interest in deriving structured data from text using machine learning.
Dr. Elizabeth Stearns, Professor of Sociology and Public Policy Department of Sociology Core Faculty Public Policy Ph.D. Program	Dr. Stearns studies education and focuses on the institutional barriers and supports to student learning, including learning about civics, that they

	experience throughout their educational trajectories.