



SPRING 2026 | NEWSLETTER

# MSU Department of Political Science

*For Alumni & Friends*





Michigan Government Semester Program students gather to celebrate the end of their internships in and around the state Capitol. Read more about the program on page 12.

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### LETTER FROM CHAIR:

## Jeffrey Conroy-Krutz



Dear Alumni and Friends,

This Spring, we celebrated an extraordinary milestone for the Department of Political Science: more than 140 students graduated, with most collecting their diplomas in front of a crowd of thousands of family and friends—not to mention proud faculty—at the Breslin Center.

Our department has seen remarkable growth over the past decade. Since Fall 2015, the number of majors in Political Science has increased by more than 70 percent, far outpacing growth at both the University and College of Social Science levels. At a time when many question young people’s engagement with politics and public life, our students continue to demonstrate deep interest in understanding political institutions, public affairs, law, policy, diplomacy, and democratic citizenship.

That growth is also a testament to the strength of the broader PLS community. Our alumni, partners, and supporters continue to create opportunities for students through mentorship, internships, scholarships, and employment pathways. We are deeply grateful to the many alumni and friends of PLS whose generosity and engagement help make those opportunities possible. We share news on many of those programs in this issue of our newsletter.

This year also highlighted something especially important to our mission: creating spaces where students can engage seriously and thoughtfully with ideas and with one another. In an era marked by division, distrust, and rapid social change, we believe universities must remain places where difficult conversations can occur with rigor, openness, and mutual respect.

One example was our new Civil Discourse course. This Spring, students in the course were challenged to move beyond slogans and surface-level disagreement by engaging one another through careful research, active listening, and evidence-based argumentation. They explored contentious contemporary issues while learning how to listen charitably, understand competing perspectives, and engage in productive disagreement. The course reflected what many of our students are seeking from higher education: not simply information, but the skills and habits necessary for meaningful democratic participation.

We also saw exciting new energy through the LeFrak Forum on Science, Reason, and Modern Democracy under the new leadership of Assistant Professor Raúl Rodríguez. Through the new LeFrak Fellows program, students participated in discussions, conferences, lectures, and shared intellectual experiences centered on this year’s theme, “The Pursuit of Happiness.” By bringing students together around enduring questions in political philosophy and democratic life, the program further fostered the kind of vibrant, intellectual community that defines the best of university life.

Together, these accomplishments reflect a department that continues to grow, not only in size, but also in ambition and impact. We are proud of our students, faculty, staff, alumni, and supporters, and we remain optimistic about the future of Political Science at MSU. At a moment when thoughtful engagement with politics and public life is more important than ever, we are excited to continue building a community that prepares students not only for successful careers, but also for meaningful participation in democratic society.

#YesPLS!

Jeff Conroy-Krutz



## New Civil Discourse class in PLS teaches students to argue the right way

**First rule of Civil Discourse:** Come prepared (do your research).

**Second rule:** Be respectful.

**Third rule:** Be charitable.

**Final rule:** Be brave.

These rules were up on the whiteboard nearly every session of the newly created PLS Civil Discourse class, led by PLS Instructor Chayse Hurley. The rules were co-created by Hurley and the 25 students in her Spring 2026 course.

“We laid down the rules of engagement. You always had to be prepared. You had to do your research and be honest about their level of preparedness,” Hurley said. “They had to be respectful. We talked about what that meant, and basically it came down to listening and not cutting people off.”

Hurley didn’t lecture in the bright room in Bessey Hall. Usually, she sat among the ring of desks filled with students who walked into the program, many with strongly partisan views and not necessarily always thinking much deeper than the latest clickbait headline.

“They were clear about their political affiliations and would cut each other off and throw out random things they heard,” Hurley said. “The discussions at first were hyperpolarized and very surface level.”

But the students read Aristotle’s “On Rhetoric,” where the ancient Greek philosopher laid out how to persuade audiences effectively, using reason (logos), character (ethos), and emotion (pathos).

They also wrote reflection papers, focusing on how to research their positions using empirical evidence. They watched politicians debate in person. They learned to fairly consider others’ viewpoints.

As they did all these things, something shifted.

“A lot of the students really highlighted how much change they saw throughout their classmates through the semester,” Hurley said. “What I noticed was the increase in their ability to really charitably look at one another’s perspectives. Not just pick apart an argument, but really listening and asking ‘What are the values behind that perspective? What are the nuances?’”

In an era of extreme partisanship and rising political violence in the US, Hurley had taught them that all sides can find both meaningful places of agreement and meaningful places of disagreement.

“Over the course of the semester, they learned to have really civil, nuanced conversations,” Hurley said. “That was what I enjoyed most about the course.”

For Political Science Pre-Law rising senior Aidan Baedke, the class was different from any other class he had taken at MSU and is great preparation for law school.

“I personally loved the class. I thought it was a very fun change of pace from other classes and really enjoyed all of the discussions. I also felt like it better prepared me for law school and post-grad activities compared to more traditional classes. I learned how to ‘argue’ better and learned so much on what makes a discussion good/ productive,” Baedke said.

Hurley got the idea for the course from discussion with her previous students. They told her they wanted more meaningful engagement, both with faculty and each other. Her K-12 teaching background had shown Hurley that students can learn a lot from each other. So she asked, why not teach them how?

“I was hearing that when students had pictured their college experience, they had expected those deep meaningful discussions. They want to engage. They want rich conversation,” Hurley said.

At the same time, alumni and faculty both were saying that there needed to be more than just an expectation of civility on campus, but actual training. Students needed the chance to discover what it means to be civil, what tools promote civility, and, simply, how to be a better listener.

Hurley found that the best way to foster civility in the classroom is to build relationships. She started each class with a “weird ice breaker” or game. From there, they would move into their discussion – usually on one topic, but sometimes two – that the students had selected and prepared for.

Each discussion had 2-4 facilitators who would choose the topic, assign readings to the class, and open the discussions. Each discussion also had one student who was the “active listener,” taking notes and writing a review of how the discussion went.

The first discussion was like jumping into the deep end of the pool, Hurley said. The students had chosen the Israel-Palestinian conflict right in the height of tensions.

“There was no brawl or anything, but it was not as civil as it could have been. It was kind of a good thing because we had a lot of room to grow,” she laughed.

Over the year they tackled environmental policy, immigration, gun rights and control, racial justice, marijuana legalization, and many other topics.

Their final discussion focused on what the students would do to improve the Civil Discourse class in the future. Hurley was pleasantly surprised at the way they appreciated the different aspects of the class.

“They would say the readings were really hard. They would say, ‘Man, that was really hard. That was terrible. But also assign it again!’” she said. “I think they saw the real-world applications to the work we were doing and showed it in their assignments. Their papers were fun to read. They had voice and were thoughtful and fun.”

They also suggested more discussions on topics that weren’t necessarily as clearly partisan, such as AI data centers and other issues that aren’t “heavy hitters.”

The course will be offered again in Spring 2027, and Hurley believes it would benefit any student at MSU to learn how to conduct civil discourse.

“If you are a student in our modern world, you should want to engage meaningfully in conversation and learn how to do that better,” Hurley said. “Political Science students are more inclined to it because they are passionate about politics but there is a lot of skill building that everyone can benefit from.”

## PLS major Stella Weiss awarded 2026 Gerber Scholarship

The Burton L. and Rosalie P. Gerber Scholarship was established to provide assistance to a student who has shown through academic excellence and diverse activities that they have a commitment to public service, with a goal of joining one of the foreign affairs or national intelligence agencies of the United States.

This year’s recipient of the Gerber Scholarship is Stella Weiss, an Army ROTC cadet and a Political Science Pre-Law major. Last year, she received the Jack Katosh Political Science ROTC Award. She plans to attend law school and become a Judge Advocate General.

“As a Political Science Pre-Law student in the Honors College, I have worked hard to challenge myself academically and develop the skills necessary for a career in law,” Weiss wrote. “Professionally, I plan to commission into the U.S. Army National Guard as a Second Lieutenant and serve as an Adjutant General Officer.”

The goal of her career is to help others, she said.

“I want to become a lawyer to advocate for those who may not always have a voice and to make sure that justice is accessible to everyone. I am motivated by the opportunity to challenge myself through rigorous training and education, both in the military and in the legal profession. Through these experiences, I hope to grow into a resilient and empathetic leader who can support my community and country,” Weiss wrote.

Weiss earned the award with both her academic performance and her extracurricular activities, said Undergraduate Program Director, Associate Professor Andrew Kerner.

“Stella is an extraordinary student in the classroom who also exemplifies the kind of curiosity and initiative we love to see in our best students outside the classroom. At MSU, Stella participated in our study abroad program in the UK and in our ROTC program. Outside of MSU, she has been an advocate for women through the Women’s Center of Greater Lansing, helping them with professional development and offering general guidance,” Dr. Kerner said.

# PLS students receive departmental awards for research, assistance, and community service

Many Political Science students excelled at public service, research, and teaching assistance this year, and three of them have been honored with awards from the Department this Spring for their efforts.



## SEAN TINSLEY

For his research with Professor Ryan Black on the U.S. Supreme Court, the **PLS Undergraduate Research award** went to **Sean Tinsley**.

“Over the course of the last three years, I’ve had the absolute pleasure of watching Sean develop as both a student and a researcher,” Prof. Black said. “The paper for which he won this award encapsulates

those talents incredibly well. It’s got careful attention to detail, confident yet measured conclusions, and an enthusiasm to wrestle with truly complex and competing considerations when the US Supreme Court considers a case.”

Tinsley appreciated the opportunity to conduct research with Prof. Black and learn from him.

“I am honored to receive the PLS Undergraduate Research Award. Throughout my time here at MSU, the Political Science courses have taught me not only about political behavior and institutions, but how to apply theoretical concepts to my own research endeavors. Thank you to all of my Political Science professors for supporting my academics these past three years,” Tinsley said.



## SARAH FAZLAGIC

**Sarah Fazlagic** was awarded the **PLS Public Service award** for her community service work as a member of the

MSU Women’s Tennis team.

“It is my absolute honor to nominate Sarah Fazlagic for the PLS Public Service Award,” said MSU Women’s Tennis Head Coach Kim Bruno. “Sarah is not only a standout leader on the tennis court, but a young woman whose commitment to service has transformed the culture of our program and elevated our entire team’s sense of purpose.”

Fazlagic led the team to win the ITA Regional Team Community Service Award for a wide variety of service opportunities, from tennis-based outreach to volunteering at the local food bank and participating in reading programs for children.

“Sarah has an exceptional ability to recognize needs in the community and mobilize her teammates to meet them,” Coach Bruno said. “She embodies the values this award seeks to recognize, and her legacy of service will continue to influence our program long after her time here.”

For Fazlagic, the PLS award represents what she has truly valued as a college student – the chance to give back.

“Being able to give back to the community and get involved in ways that go beyond campus has always been important to me, so it’s really meaningful to be recognized for that. I’m grateful for all the opportunities I’ve had to work with different communities and be part of something bigger than myself. This award motivates me to keep showing up, staying involved, and continuing to make a positive impact wherever I can,” Fazlagic said.



## KATHRYN GATES

**Kathryn Gates** was awarded the **PLS Undergraduate Teaching Assistance award** for her work

with Associate Professor Eric Gonzalez Juenke as an Undergraduate Learning Assistant for his large Political Science introductory course.

Prof. Juenke said Gates stood out by proactively reaching out to students and offering help. She attended every lecture, held office hours immediately after class, and added her own experiences to help students learn.

“To say Kat took pride in her duties is a massive understatement. I was incredibly impressed and grateful. She is an outstanding Political Science undergrad, and I think she deserves this recognition. I think she is going to have a big career in law or politics, so we should show her and others that we saw these talents early on,” Prof. Juenke said.

Gates said her experience as a ULA deepened her own understanding and appreciation for political science. She also enjoyed working with Prof. Juenke.

“Having Dr. Juenke as a professor and getting to work alongside him has been one of the highlights of my collegiate career. He has a profound impact on all of his students, which extends far beyond what he may even realize. I thank Dr. Juenke for his trust and for his continuing support. I also thank the Department of Political Science for the opportunity to give back to the institution that has given me so much,” Gates said.

Students were presented their awards at the Department’s Spring graduation reception, in the MSU Broad Art Museum on May 1.

For ways on how to support recognition for PLS undergraduates, visit:

[polisci.msu.edu/about/giving](https://polisci.msu.edu/about/giving)

# Three MSU PLS grads named 2026 Michigan Political Leadership Program Fellows

PLS alumni Jolie Lawrence, Josh Darnell, and Ava Vitale were named this January to the new cohort of 24 rising leaders for the Michigan Political Leadership Program.

This bipartisan program is operated by MSU’s Institute for Public Policy and Social Research (IPPSR), with this new cohort starting in February. MPLP is intended to develop future political leaders in Michigan. More than half of the program’s graduates have gone on to be elected or appointed to positions in government. The program has been praised due to its bipartisan nature and

was one of the first of its kind to train members of both political parties.

“IPPSR is proud to sponsor MPLP, which we believe helps to deepen Michigan’s political bench by educating its future political leaders,” said MSU PLS Associate Professor Corwin Smidt, Interim Director of IPPSR. “On behalf of MSU, I am happy to welcome our 2026 fellows.”

Flint resident Josh Darnell is currently the Deputy Director of Constituent Relations for Speaker of the House Matt Hall. He earned his degree in Political

Science, with a minor in Law, Justice, and Public Policy. Before starting with the Michigan House of Representatives, Josh had previously worked on Congressman John James’ successful 2022 campaign and with a Lansing-based political consulting firm. He is committed to crafting effective policy aimed at improving the state’s infrastructure, bolstering public safety, and encouraging businesses to invest in Michigan.

He had heard of the program from co-workers and alumni of the program, and hopes it will help him learn to become an effective lawmaker someday.

“I heard nothing but positive things about the program. I do hope to run for political office myself so I feel this will be a fantastic program for getting a good footing in policy and governance,” Darnell said. “At the end of it, I hope that I’ve grown as a person, expanding my horizons and gaining new perspectives. These are things that will prepare me to be an efficient public official.”

Jolie Lawrence of Howell is currently the legislative coordinator in the office of Gov. Gretchen Whitmer. She graduated from MSU in 2023 with a bachelor’s degree in Political Science Pre-Law and a minor in Law, Justice, and Public Policy. During her time at MSU, she was a part of the Michigan Government Semester Program, where she began interning with

State Sen. Sylvia Santana. Since then, she has also worked for Senators Sam Singh, Erika Geiss, and Sue Shink. Jolie is interested in mental health and education policy.

Ava Vitale of Port Huron currently serves as the legislative aide to State Rep. Curt VanderWall. Her experience spans both politics and media, including working as an on-air personality at 96.9 WBTI. She is also deeply involved with the City Rescue Mission of Lansing, where she supports homeless women and children. This work has given her a profound understanding of the challenges faced by at-risk communities, insight she hopes to carry forward as she pursues a law degree with the goal of becoming a state prosecutor.

“I am delighted to congratulate this outstanding cohort of students and to celebrate the Michigan Political Leadership Program, which for decades has exemplified MSU’s commitment to public service through rigorous, bipartisan training,” said PLS Department Chair Jeff Conroy-Krutz. “MPLP’s remarkable record of preparing diverse leaders to serve their communities and govern effectively speaks to the enduring value and impact of this program in Michigan and beyond.”

Applicants to MPLP were reviewed by the program’s co-directors, former Republican State Sen. Tonya Schuitmaker and former Democratic State Rep. Rudy Hobbs.

## ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT:

# Joellen Snow

This March, the College of Social Science celebrated one of PLS's alumni as a pioneer in the practice of law. Joellen Snow is a 1975 graduate of Michigan State with a degree in Political Science. Originally from Texas, Snow and her family moved to Midland for her father's job when she was 12. She toured both University of Michigan and Michigan State University in high school and 'absolutely fell in love' with the campus of MSU.

"It was my ideal of what a college campus should be," she explained. "I loved the older buildings, the ivy-covered brick ... I was just overwhelmed by it, and still am. Every time I come back to campus, I'm just in awe of how beautiful it is."

Snow has been a practicing attorney in Houston, Texas for over 46 years, but her journey along this path first began while she was a Spartan. "I really started to envision my future career while I was at Michigan State," she says. "I had so many wonderful opportunities in addition to great professors and courses." Snow returned to Texas after graduation and earned her Juris Doctorate and Master of Public Affairs from the University of Texas.

Snow felt supported by her professors and fellow students while earning her degree, despite the College of Law being fairly male-dominated in the 1970s. She came face-to-face with sex discrimination in one of her first jobs out of law school, and, like many women at that time, eventually started her own practice.

"Even though I'd had good experiences while in law school, I think the job market was tough at that time for women attorneys," she explained.

Shortly after establishing her practice, Snow was approached by Kathy Whitmire, the first female mayor of Houston, who offered her a position as an associate Municipal Court judge, a role

Snow served in for over 40 years. After several years of representing the Texas State Employees Union in a successful effort to establish their right to organize throughout the state, a colleague suggested she consider probate law, and offered to assist her in transitioning to a new area of practice. Snow has specialized in probate, guardianship, and estate planning ever since.

Snow enjoys the opportunities she gets through her practice to work closely with families facing the often-daunting task of probating wills, settling estates, and selling off property after a loved one has passed. "I have an opportunity to help people when they're at a very vulnerable and difficult time in their lives," she said. "People are overwhelmed, they may be grieving, and in need of someone to walk them through this process. I feel like I can be helpful to them in that time of need."

Snow envisioned the beginnings of a fruitful career while she was earning her degree at Michigan State, and it has inspired her to continue to give back to the school that started it all. She is passionate about supporting experiential learning opportunities for students; as an undergrad, she worked for the Judiciary Committee of the Michigan House of Representatives and the district offices of two members of Congress.

"I ended up with a really well-rounded experience both in and outside of the classroom" she said. "I believe it's great for students to have some experience in the real world before they graduate from college."

Snow gives back through her establishment of an experiential learning scholarship for Women's Leadership Institute (WLI) students and through mentoring students in the Social Science Scholars program and WLI. She enjoys sharing some of her wisdom and the lessons she has learned throughout her storied career with eager Scholars and



WLI student cohort members. "The women in the WLI remind me so much of myself when I was in college," she said.

"It seems like all the students in both the Scholars program and the WLI are really bright, super motivated, interesting students," Snow added. "It's been a real pleasure to meet some of them and get to know them, and it gives me a reason to come back to campus."

For Snow, reflecting on the women who came before us is an opportunity to recognize those who fought to secure civil rights, voting rights and equal opportunity.

Snow herself was active in the Feminist movement while in school, and encourages students to carry the torch of activism.

"We haven't broken every glass ceiling. We're making progress, but we still have a long way to go," she said. "I think it's really important for women today to know and appreciate what female activists have done throughout our history to improve our lives, and what we can do to improve the lives of our daughters and granddaughters."

## STUDENT SPOTLIGHT:

# Lin Cabada



Growing up between Michigan and the Philippines, Lin Cabada learned early that history lives in families as much as it does in textbooks. Now a rising senior majoring in Political Science and Linguistics at MSU, she is working to ensure that Asian American stories — especially stories of joy, resilience, and community — receive the visibility they deserve.

Next Fall, Cabada will be entering her third year of working with the Asian Pacific American (APA) Studies Program as a Program Assistant. In addition to her dual majors, she is also minoring in Asian Pacific American Studies and Women & Gender Studies.

Cabada describes her upbringing as "unconventional." She was raised in a diverse household, with family located in both Grand Rapids and Quezon City-Metro Manila, Philippines. Her early experiences of frequent travel to the Philippines also led her to want to learn more about Asian culture and her own heritage.

Cabada's family heritage has also influenced what she has chosen to study at MSU. She is a first-generation college student. Her grandfather served in the Vietnam War, which helped him earn U.S. citizenship for himself and his children, including Cabada's father.

Her family's history has given her a deep sense of gratitude, as well as an

awareness of how her own experiences are connected to broader historical forces.

"I wouldn't be here or be who I am without the people who raised me and the sacrifices they made," she said. "That curiosity is what inspired me to get involved in APA Studies and to become knowledgeable on these topics."

Cabada also wants to play a role in educating others on the history of the APIDA (Asian Pacific Islander Desi American) population in America. "War history in Southeast Asia has dictated a lot of immigrant and refugee history, and I didn't learn much about that during history classes growing up," she said. "I realized that there's a story to be told here, and it's not one that is being taught in mainstream history."

With this, she wants to make sure that what's talked about in history classes includes not just stories of hardship, but ones of success and celebration, as well. "When we do hear about Asian American history, it often focuses on war and poverty," Cabada explained. "That's not what I want to focus on. I want to amplify [APIDA] voices and do research that exemplifies experiences of Asian American joy."

One way she has done this is through the publication of an oral history project for her Asian American History class, titled "Following the Apple Blossom: Spoken Stories of the Asian Diaspora in Michigan."

"Being able to share those stories and give agency back to these communities was really amazing," she said.

In her role with the APA Studies Program, Cabada assists with event planning, helps students get involved with APA Studies and organizations like the Asian Pacific American Student Organization (APASO), and has served on the APIDA/A Heritage Month Committee. One of her favorite parts of the role is helping students find support and community on campus.

"Having an academic space like APA Studies at MSU legitimizes the mission of

ethnic studies as a whole, which is to get people involved, spread visibility and form community," she explained.

One of the most important aspects of APIDA/A Heritage Month, Cabada says, is the opportunity it presents to increase visibility and recognition of this population. It creates a space for conversations about our shared history and not shying away from the stories of struggle and tragedy, but ensuring happy moments are highlighted, as well.

"I believe that finding joy and celebrating the everyday lives of individuals is one of the most powerful acts of resistance available to researchers, and one of the most meaningful ways they can impact our communities," Cabada said.

"Being able to come together and celebrate just adds legitimacy to the cause. Having that ability to celebrate one another is crucial, especially in times like these. It's us rising from the ashes and saying, 'We're still here, we still have a voice, and our stories still matter.'"



Having an academic space like APA Studies at MSU legitimizes the mission of ethnic studies as a whole, which is to get people involved, spread visibility and form community.

- Lin Cabada

FACULTY SPOTLIGHT:

# Dr. Eric Gonzalez Juenke



For most of his career as a political scientist, Dr. Eric Gonzalez Juenke has focused his research on state legislative elections. These normally fly under the radar of both national media and voters.

In the past, these races were usually determined by local-level concerns and driven by candidates' own personalities, résumés, and connections with voters. However, with the rise of hyper-partisanship, these races have attracted new attention from national parties and leaders, and from voters themselves. State legislatures often have responsibility over issues central to national parties' concerns, including how elections are run and electoral districts are drawn. With Michigan's closely divided Senate, the victory of Democrat Chedrick Green in the Michigan State Senate District 35 race over the Republican candidate this spring attracted a lot of attention.

"This is a validation of our research that people will vote for their team above all else," Juenke, an Associate Professor who joined PLS in 2009, said. "Local and state races are going to receive much more attention. People are watching them and considering how they affect the 2026 general election and beyond."

But to only look at these elections through the prism of how they impact national politics is short-sighted, Prof. Juenke argues. In fact, state and local races provide potential opportunities for candidates from diverse groups to win office. Candidates from historically underrepresented groups—based on race, gender, sexual orientation, class, religion, education—do sometimes break through for the first time in these local and state legislative races.

This provides opportunities for what social scientists call descriptive representation. The theory goes that having elected representatives who look more like the country, in all its diversity, enhances democracy.

By this measure, for a long time, democracy in the US wasn't meeting expectations. State legislatures were overwhelmingly white and male, for example. Researchers blamed this on voters' biases.

Prof. Juenke's research challenged those assumptions by collecting lots of data.

"My work over the past 10-15 years has been to spotlight these state legislative races where there is so much data available. I collect the data on who is running and how. Previously, studies only focused on the winners in a district and theorized that the lack of diversity is what the voters chose," Prof. Juenke said.

This skewed our understanding of politics, Prof. Juenke argues. Research needed to consider not just who was winning office, but who was running in the first place. If voters in these local and state races were mainly presented with candidates from certain groups, they could, by definition, only elect people from certain groups.

By looking at data on who was running, Prof. Juenke discovered something important. Voters didn't seem to consider candidate race and gender as much as researchers had thought. What they overwhelmingly cared about was party.

This meant that voters are just as likely to vote a minority candidate into office if that is the candidate on their party ticket. This is especially true under hyper-polarization. Voters use their party identity to look past any other biases they may have for or against candidates.

"Minoritized candidates do really well when they have a chance to run, but rarely are they on voters' ballots," Prof. Juenke said. "Researchers thought it was due to racism by the voters, when actually it is because the voters often only have the option of a white man."

In practice, the Democratic Party appears to be more diverse thanks to decades

of party-wide recruitment of minority candidates for all races – not just governors and the U.S. Congress. Republicans have not made similar efforts historically, Prof. Juenke said. This research has culminated in a pending paper on the ways party elites have limited voters' choices, expected out next year.

Meanwhile, the new emphasis by party and the public on these state races – and the widespread attempt at mid-decade redistricting – may mean that many voters will see more diversity in their state legislative ballots than previously.

"What we have shown is districts don't have to be majority-minority in order to elect a minoritized candidate into office," he said. "In some of these newly redrawn districts, minoritized candidates will still have a chance of being elected -

depending on the partisan makeup of the district. It's not guaranteed but there is still a chance."

The precedents these redistricting efforts are making could change everything for local and state races, he said.

"This is a whole new world now. These states can decide they are going to redistrict after each election," Prof. Juenke said. "This will be super important to watch as we approach the census of 2030."

Because Prof. Juenke's work also touches on the way minority candidates and communities perform in state elections, he is paying close attention to the effects of the recent U.S. Supreme Court decision relating to the Voting Rights Act.

"The effects of the decision are disastrous for many voters, but they don't have to be

disastrous for descriptive representation in the future," he said. "The parties are really going to have to figure out how to move forward without the Voting Rights Act protections in place. My colleagues and I will be looking at what representation looks like in a post-Voting Rights Act world. Right now, things are so unstable that we are going to have to wait until the dust settles before making predictions about the near future."



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- Dr. Eric Gonzalez Juenke

## MSU PLS student named a finalist for the Truman Scholarship



This February, Public Policy major Lily Dixon was one of two MSU students named as a finalist in the nationally competitive Truman Scholarship.

The Truman Scholarship, sponsored by the Harry S. Truman Scholarship Foundation, recognizes students with exceptional leadership potential who are committed to affecting change through public service. It provides financial support for graduate study and leadership training for approximately 62 students each year.

"Lily is an incredibly hard-working and dedicated student. She puts her full effort into her academics and involvements, and continually strives for continued learning and growth. Lily is so deserving of her nomination. She is such a positive representative of the PLS department," said Political Science academic advisor Krista Zeig.

Dixon grew up in Michigan's Upper Peninsula and graduated from Marquette Senior High School. She is pursuing dual degrees in Public Policy and Art & Humanities, with a concentration in

Community Engagement. Her policy interests include juvenile justice, rural representation, and the intersection of the arts, culture, and public policy. She is also a Political Science Scholar, in her third year in the Honors College, and minoring in design justice and music.

Dixon's post-graduation plans include a joint JD/MPP program. She aspires to a career in public service, whether that means shaping legislation, advancing policy research, or one day running for office.

## Three PLS students awarded Michigan Government Semester Program scholarships

Three Political Science majors were awarded Michigan Government Semester Program scholarships this year.

The undergraduate internship program, overseen by PLS Assistant Professor Marty Jordan, pairs students with mentors in legislative, government, public policy, non-profit, and advocacy groups around the Lansing region. The students work 18 hours a week as an intern and attend weekly lectures as well. The current class of 25 students brings the total of alumni of the program to over 300.

One of the scholarship winners, **A’Nyah Banta**, is a Political Science Pre-Law sophomore who interned with Michigan Legislative Consultants. Her work included attending legislative committees, performing research for clients, and getting to know their needs.

“I was amazed and grateful for the scholarship and for the internship as well,” Banta said. “I am so fortunate because it is hard to get an internship, and I really appreciate [Dr. Jordan’s] help and guidance.

Banta strongly feels everyone would benefit from a semester with MGSP for the networking opportunities, not only with professionals in public service but also with peers.

“I got to meet so many people. We really bonded as a class,” Banta said.

The second recipient, **Victoria Bucher**, interned with Judge Rosemarie Aquilina (MI 30th Circuit Court). After a semester with Judge Aquilina, the Public Policy sophomore is more determined than ever to become a judge.

“She’s fantastic. I have learned so much about her judicial philosophy and about

the entire legal system,” Bucher said. “It has really defined the direction of my career.”

Bucher appreciated Judge Aquilina’s focus on victims. The judge’s advocacy was very important to Bucher, who interacted with all the players in the courtroom.

“MGSP is an incredible opportunity to grow my professional writing and to make friends with other Political Science majors,” Bucher said. “Dr. Jordan is an incredible mentor. He cares so deeply about student success. It’s very intense but so worth it. I would do it again in a heartbeat.”

The third recipient, Political Science Pre-Law senior **Esther Waller**, interned with S.A.F.E. Place shelter. She found her placement was a perfect fit given her interests in social work and social policy.

The MGSP scholarship made a big difference, as Waller had to travel to Charlotte for the position. There, she was based at the Eaton County courthouse,

where she helped victims apply for personal protection orders, worked with law clerks, and assisted people who are going through “a pretty hard time,” she said.

“Seeing this side of the justice system has been really great,” Waller said. “It can be so hard to contextualize in a classroom, but MGSP puts you directly on the path of helping people.”

She also appreciated Jordan’s enthusiasm and inspiration

“Marty got me to really see what I want to do,” Waller said.

After graduation, Waller plans on moving to England and volunteering with a shelter, ideally in an urban situation, and working with women who are victims of violence, people who are unhoused, and at-risk youth. She is also planning to get a master’s degree in social work and figuring out how to tie that back into political science and government.



## Public Policy major Ben Lowen named PLS Outstanding Senior for 2026



Ben Lowen is leaving Michigan State University with a bachelor’s degree in Public Policy, all the experiences he could cram into three years, and wise words from his current boss.

“Go to bed tired,” Governor Gretchen Whitmer told Lowen, an intern in her constituent services office this semester.

“I had lunch with the governor, and we were talking about how to keep going after the (2024) election. She told me that for her, it was to work as hard as she could every day,” Lowen said. “That when you spend the day doing all you can and go to bed tired, that’s when you can sleep.”

Lowen, a Public Policy major, with minors in Urban & Regional Planning, Economics, and Environmental Social Science, has been living this advice his entire college career. For this and other accomplishments, Lowen is this year’s Political Science Outstanding Senior, as selected by the Department.

Originally from Grand Rapids, Lowen spent his first college year at Loyola University Chicago, where he majored in philosophy, math, and theater. It didn’t take him long to realize this wasn’t the path for him.

He left Chicago and joined AmeriCorps, spending the year working with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) responding to disasters across the country. He visited nearly every state, helping dig people out of debris and gaining a love of public service.

“I love policy and working at those levels but sometimes it’s just good to get your hands dirty,” Lowen said.

When he decided to return to college, Lowen selected MSU specifically for its Public Policy major and the reputation of the Michigan Government Semester Program (MGSP), which offers internships with state legislators, government agencies, and nonprofits, combined with talks by policy experts in Lansing.

Lowen has a strong interest in environmental policy that expanded to include urban planning and land use. His path was influenced in part by one of his mentors, Associate Professor Josh Sapotichne, who gave him a taste for the policy process.

“[Prof. Sapotichne] made me want to get out and implement policy now,” Lowen said. “I knew I wanted to get a degree and get into policy as soon as I could.”

Also impacting Lowen’s scholarship and career goals is Assistant Professor Marty Jordan, who leads MGSP.

“Ben is an exceptional student and an exemplary departmental citizen whose academic excellence and deep commitment to public service make him truly deserving of this honor,” Prof. Jordan said. “During his undergraduate studies, Ben has completed four internships: one with the Governor, one with the Michigan Department of the Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy, and two with state legislators. I’m not aware of many undergraduates who have completed four

internships during their academic studies. Simply put, Ben is awesome!”

Lowen spent two years working with PLS Professor Sarah Reckhow researching civic education reforms.

“I am grateful for getting to know Ben and work with him during the past two years. He is a truly outstanding and exemplary student—combining intellectual curiosity with a serious commitment to public service and engagement. We worked together on research, with Ben helping to shape the project’s analysis of how states and localities adopt civic education reforms. In addition to his coursework and internships, Ben has gone the extra mile to get involved in politics locally,” Prof. Reckhow said.

Aside from his internship and full load of classes, Lowen serves as vice-chair of the East Lansing Housing Commission and is on the board of the MSU Student Housing Cooperative. He is on the e-board of the Spartan Housing Alliance and is working toward creating a queer homeless shelter called A Place for Us in Lansing. He even has started his own political action committee.

“My advice to other students is to follow wherever your passions fall. MSU is a great place to get a lot of experience,” Lowen said. “Just go for it. Do everything and let yourself fail.”

Following graduation, Lowen is moving to Baltimore, Maryland, where he is hoping to confirm a job with the mayor’s office or state government.

“I love what the mayor is doing (in Baltimore) and want to both get experience and contribute to all they are doing,” Lowen said. “But I will always call Michigan my home.”



## New LeFrak Fellows Program helps students focus on “the Pursuit of Happiness”

Founded in 1989 in the Department of Political Science, the LeFrak Forum on Science, Reason, and Modern Democracy is a center for research and debate on the theory and practice of modern democracy.

But LeFrak’s newly appointed director, Assistant Professor Raúl Rodríguez, is taking the initiative in new directions in its fourth decade.

Rodríguez’s vision is for LeFrak to serve as a place where not just fellow academics but also students – graduate and undergraduate – can come together to discuss real-world issues and the most pressing questions of modern democracy.

Since Rodríguez took over as Forum Director in Fall 2025, he has brought opportunities for students to reflect on those issues in a surprising range of spaces, whether it be meeting at MSU’s Beaumont Tower for smoothies, dining in a fancy restaurant, or viewing art at the Art Institute of Chicago.

This variety of opportunities engages students. “[Political Theory is] not meant to be stuffy or boring,” Rodríguez said.

In celebration of the semiquincentennial of the signing of the Declaration of Independence this summer, this year’s theme for the Forum was the “Pursuit of Happiness.” LeFrak programming focused on examining the question of happiness by giving students opportunities to engage with great texts from the history of political philosophy and contemporary scholarship and thought.

Starting with a handful of students he had personally taught, Rodríguez started the LeFrak Fellows program to create a place of strong intellectual discussion and debate with social interaction.

“I am young enough to remember what a vibrant intellectual community meant to me as an undergraduate student. It was one of my fondest memories of my college days, and I wanted MSU students to have the same experience,” Rodríguez said. “This is my way of paying forward the opportunity I had.”

He brought serious scholars to campus to meet and discuss the theme with students, including Aristotle and the Pursuit of Happiness and “The Modern Pursuit of Happiness.”

Rodríguez and the LeFrak Fellows also traveled to Austin, Texas to participate in a joint conference, where they presented their original research.

The LeFrak Fellows Program has given students more than just space for intellectual discussion and debate

“I have found my best friends for life here. We bonded over serious questions and invaluable discussions,” said Fellow Chloe Carter, a Political Science and Chicano/ Latino Studies student.

At a year-end celebration at MSU’s Broad Art Museum, Rodríguez summarized his busy first year and reminded the Fellows and others of the reason behind the Forum.

“Prominent scholar Robert Bartlett [a Boston College professor who visited the Forum this Fall] raised an unsettling truth – happiness depends on good luck,” Prof.

Rodríguez said. “Sometimes people have bad luck or tragedy hits. And Aristotle commonsensically tells us that one cannot be called happy in the face of tragedy. Nevertheless, he gives us hope—happiness depends much more on good character than good luck, on learning how to be excellent and content no matter the circumstances.”

Rodríguez thanked Assistant Director James Guest, who joined the Forum for the 2025-2026 academic year, and presented several awards to students, including:

- Tristan Williams received the Arthur Melzer Award on the modern pursuit of happiness
- Chloe Carter received the Ethel LeFrak Award for her paper on death and happiness
- Abigail Garrett received the Samuel J. LeFrak Award for her paper on happiness and the question of religious faith
- Laila Ismail, student director of undergraduate programming for LeFrak, won the Montaigne Award for her commitment to the Forum and her pursuit of self-knowledge

Garrett, a Psychology major, found her time as a LeFrak Fellow to be an educational experience and more.

“This is one of the better experiences of my life – the people I’ve met and all that I have learned,” she said. “I’ve always had an interest in political thought in terms of psychology, and the question of happiness made it all more relevant to me.”

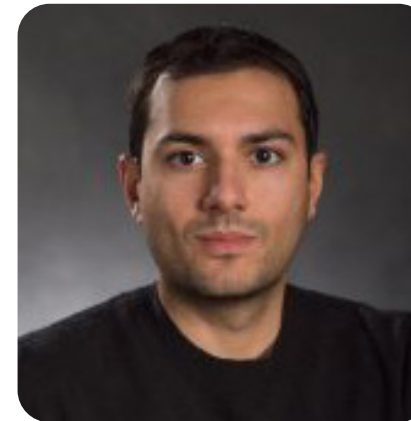
Prof. Rodríguez is planning even more events and expansions. This summer, LeFrak is hosting a K-12 Professional Development program focused on teaching the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution in engaging and meaningful ways.

He hopes to grow the Fellows program beyond the current group of more than 200 students. He also plans to begin a more exclusive LeFrak Scholars program, with 40-60 students.

“I want to help these students not just grow interested in the material but to keep advancing their knowledge and their interest,” he said.

This Fall, he is coordinating a conference on the topic of education and the pursuit of happiness, where he hopes attendees and students will explore the ultimate purpose of higher education and what universities stand for.

## New research by PLS faculty and recent graduate points to dangers in recent US foreign policy



At a recent address to the World Economic Forum in Davos, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney made a provocative statement. He suggested that the foundations of the contemporary international system are fracturing. The assumptions many states once took for granted – that global rules are stable, predictable, and capable of constraining major powers – can no longer be relied upon.

Prime Minister Carney’s remarks coincide with growing uncertainty over US foreign policy. In recent months, the US has attacked countries like Venezuela, Iran, Somalia, Syria, Yemen, and Nigeria, and threatened to use force against Cuba and Greenland. As a result, there are reports that many long-standing US partners are weighing deeper ties with China. So, what might drive countries to decide to pursue new partnerships over trying to maintain long-standing diplomatic ties with the US?

In new research, PLS Associate Professor Shahryar Minhas and MSU PLS alum Dr. Ha Eun Choi, a Postdoctoral Research Associate in the Department of Politics & Public Administration at the University of Potsdam in Germany, explore how US foreign policy over the last two decades has impacted how other countries relate with Washington. Teaming up with Scott

de Marchi, Professor of Political Science at Duke, and Max Gallop, a Senior Lecturer of Politics at the University of Strathclyde Glasgow, Prof. Minhas and Dr. Choi measured US overseas commitments, in terms of activity in violent conflicts and defense spending, between 2000 and 2020. Both of these indicators rose significantly after 9/11, peaking during the Second Iraq War.

These kinds of commitments can create dangers to major powers, the researchers argue. This is because others notice major powers getting tied down.

Syria in December 2024 is a clear example. The long-time dictator there, Bashar al-Assad, was forced from power after Russia, overstretched by its war in Ukraine, failed to reinforce its long-time client. The reversal was swift because other actors could see Russian bandwidth was consumed elsewhere.

To get a sense of how countries react to US commitments, the researchers used UN General Assembly voting to map diplomatic alignment. This is a common strategy in the study of international relations, but Prof. Minhas, Dr. Choi, and their co-authors were more innovative. They looked at how countries’ voting patterns showed coalitions. They could therefore see how closely countries were connected diplomatically to the US in these coalitions.

Over this time period, some relations, like the US’s with the United Kingdom, stayed consistently positive. But US relations with other countries, like China and Russia, deteriorated after 2003, when the Iraq War began.

Over the period they study, the researchers found that, the more the US was constrained, the more countries drifted towards coalitions associated with China.

However, countries differed a lot. Specifically, countries with authoritarian political systems were much more likely to drift toward China, and also toward Russia. Democracies were more likely to stick with the US.

Political scientists often argue that alliances between democracies last longer because democratic governments are more likely to keep their promises. For them, years of military, economic, and political cooperation make those partnerships hard to replace. By contrast, authoritarian governments may switch partners more easily when it benefits them, especially if countries like China offer economic or political support without demanding democratic reforms.

However, a lot has changed in the last few years, and the researchers’ data only goes through 2020. Therefore, they cannot directly study how recent changes in US foreign policy and changes in the level of democracy in the US are affecting international relations. Still, their findings suggest that if the United States becomes less focused on democracy and more unpredictable in its commitments, both authoritarian and democratic allies may begin looking more seriously at alternatives such as China. The strength of US alliances depends not just on military power, but also on whether other countries see the United States as a stable democracy that keeps its promises.

## New research on Michigan's Middle Eastern and North African voters and their critical role in 2024



Associate Professor Cory Smidt (top left) and Assistant Professors Nura Sediqe (top right) and Meghan Wilson (left)

Michigan received huge attention by both major parties in the 2024 presidential election. Given the state's status as one of the most closely divided and vote-rich battlegrounds, both campaigns poured massive resources into potential swing voters. One of the most-targeted groups was voters of Middle Eastern & North African descent.

A team of faculty from PLS, including Associate Professor Cory Smidt and Assistant Professors Nura Sediqe and Meghan Wilson, sought to understand how so-called MENA Michiganders actually voted in 2024. They found an uptick in turnout by MENA voters, but also a decrease in support for the Democratic candidate, Vice President Kamala Harris.

However, the MENA population didn't necessarily turn to the Republican candidate, former President Donald Trump. Rather, many opted for third-party candidates for president instead. Interestingly, the group tended to maintain its loyalty to Harris' party, if not to the vice president herself, choosing Democratic candidates further down the ballot.

"We want to take a broader focus on the local political trends confronting the Michigan [Middle Eastern and North African] communities," said Dr. Smidt. "This work can help us understand the social and political issues leading up to the 2026 election."

Entitled "Un/Committed: Arab American Political Participation," the team's report studies the movement during the 2024 Democratic primary presidential election in Michigan to vote "uncommitted" instead of for the incumbent president, Joe Biden.

Many MENA voters had deep frustrations over the ongoing war in Gaza and for what they saw as President Biden's unquestioning support for Israel in the military campaign. "In Michigan, Arab Democrats were looking at the renomination of the president and asked 'what if we don't want him back?' That started the Listen to Michigan and Vote Uncommitted movements to highlight the civilian casualties in Gaza," Dr. Sediqe said.

It became a national movement and, in Michigan, it resulted in more than 100,000 uncommitted votes during the February primary.

Even though President Biden won the Michigan primary easily, the large number of uncommitted votes pointed to potential trouble for the Democratic Party come November.

"When you have elections with this thin of a margin, it is enough to switch the election outcome. They knew they could flip a state or threaten to flip a state," Dr. Sediqe said of frustrated MENA voters.

"It might have been enough for Harris to have lost the electoral votes from Michigan. They didn't cost Harris the national election, but they did cost Harris Michigan," Dr. Sediqe said.

Moving into the 2026 midterms, when Michigan has open races for governor and Senate, as well as key House and state legislative contests, the top MENA priorities include foreign

policy. According to Sediqe, MENA voters are more focused on these issues than many other Michigan voters, because they see them as directly affecting their families and their neighbors' families.

"It becomes a very personal matter to them. They say, 'I lost family lineage because of foreign policy'" Prof. Sediqe said.

But the professors' research also shows that Michigan's MENA population is itself a diverse group, which makes predicting their voting trends difficult. Like other groups, people have different perspectives based on age and religion. And members of the community are also diverse in terms of how they self-classify in terms of race. Many MENA Christians identify as "white," according to Dr. Sediqe, while those committed to other religions are more likely to identify as members of other racial groups.

Finally, the complexities of US foreign policy create divides within the broader voting public. The researchers found that, as is the case nationally, younger Democrats are more likely to be sympathetic with causes like Palestinian statehood and less supportive of Israel than their older counterparts. These considerations are sure to have significant impacts as Michigan heads into this November's elections.

## Political Science Scholars explore state government at Day at the Capitol

More than 20 PLS students toured the halls of the Michigan Capitol this April and received an insider's view of what it is like to work in state government.

The students spoke with current legislators and staffers about how they got to their jobs and what their work entails. MSU Political Science alumna Jayla Irons (Class of '23) first became interested in politics while growing up on the south side of Chicago and seeing disparity in schools across the city.

Today, Irons is a policy advisor for Gov. Gretchen Whitmer.

"My job is staying informed. I give input on when the governor should engage," she told the students, adding that her advice to them would be to "stick to what you are interested in and your moral values, and it will all turn out ok."

"All of you are geniuses, and all of you are applying for the same job. The difference is who you know," Irons told the students. "Your connections, your mentors – you never know where they might lead you."

The students also spoke with Democratic Floor Leader John Fitzgerald (83rd District). He told the students that he rose up to state government after years of city politics, which is mainly nonpartisan and local. In city politics, you focus on the results, not the methods of getting the results.

But in the Capitol, you have to acknowledge that most people react with emotion and not with rationale, he said.

"It is our job to set aside the rhetoric and focus on the solution," said Rep. Fitzgerald, who graduated from MSU

with a degree in History in 2013. "To do that you have to talk to people, find ways to connect and come across as open. You have to put the community first."

State Rep. Bryan Posthumus, Republican Floor Leader, told the students that he never had an interest in politics even though his father served as a state senator and lieutenant governor. He earned an agricultural business management degree from MSU and then ran for office during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Rep. Posthumus emphasized that inside the Capitol, Republicans and Democrats get along and work together closer than it appears from the outside.

"We all want to make our communities safer. How we get there is the difference," he said.

Kris Young, legislative director for Sen. Sam Singh, has been at the Capitol since he was a page in 2000. He recommends all people who want to work in the Capitol focus on constituent relations first.

"We all start in constituent services," he said. "Communication is the key. Your résumé up here is your relationships."

The group toured the Capitol building, from its newly renovated basement space, the Heritage Hall welcome center, to the state's



original Supreme Court hearing room. Students were able to view both the Senate and House floor and Governor's Office.

"I appreciated the tour guide so much. He had so much knowledge and skill," said PLS Scholar Jaelynn Smith. "The day was very encouraging, and I can't wait to see all of us in these spaces."

## Alumni Spotlight: Jen Flood



Five graduates of the Master of Public Policy program presented their final research project at this Spring's Capstone Forum, which also featured an inspiring speech by Michigan State Budget Director Jen Flood, herself an MSU MPP alumna.

"As a first generation, very shy college student, my path to this program and being the state's budget director was unlikely," Flood told a packed room in the MSU Union.

"I didn't have a roadmap for what came next after graduation but MSU gave me two things – a world-class education and access to opportunities that I could not have imagined. I'm forever grateful for the lessons that I learned here and the doors that opened for me because of my time at Michigan State."

Flood holds a bachelor's degree in Economics and a Master of Public Policy degree, both from MSU. She previously worked as a government policy advisor at Dykema and a communications specialist at Byrum Fisk Advocacy Communications, as a legislative assistant

in the Michigan House and Senate, and as a scheduler in the Executive Office of Gov. Jennifer Granholm.

Prior to serving as head of the State Budget Office, Flood served as Deputy Chief of Staff to Gov. Gretchen Whitmer. As State Budget Director, Flood is responsible for coordinating all aspects of the state's budget.

"The classes I took at MSU gave me skills, yes. But I think more importantly than that, perspective," Flood said. "How to think critically, how to challenge assumptions and how to approach problems methodically. That mindset – rigorous, evidence-driven thinking – is what I carry with me every single day as the State Budget Director."

Her favorite part of her job is the policy that she is able to advance. She told the students that while policy has to be based on data and evidence, it also must take into account the real-world effects and what else is affecting the residents of the state. She used the recent budget negotiations as an example.

The balanced bipartisan budget passed with nearly unanimous support and

included a historic road funding package, Flood said.

"We don't live in a world that lacks data. We live in a world that lacks shared trust in the data," she said. "I know there's a lot of people in this room focusing on making policy to improve our communities, state, country and world. I challenge everyone to take the data one step further."

"Your responsibility as a policy professional is bigger than being right. It's making the right answer matter. Pair rigor with strategy and you won't just design better policies, you'll make them real."

Flood shows the state and the country what can be accomplished with an MSU Master of Public Policy degree, said MPP Director, Assistant Professor Marty Jordan.

"She's widely recognized for her pragmatic approach as well as her commitment to data-driven accountable budgeting. Her career spans nearly two decades now of public service across Michigan government, her experience exemplifies the very impact-oriented policy leadership that we try to strive to cultivate in this program," Dr. Jordan said. "And so we are so proud to call her an alumna of MSU as well as of this program."



## MPP students showcase their research at this year's Capstone Forum

This year's MSU Master of Public Policy graduates put some of the most-pressing policy debates of our time—from affordable housing to right-to-work legislation—under the microscope.

The students presented their work at the annual MPP Capstone Forum on April 9, which also featured a keynote address by Michigan State Budget Director and MPP alumna Jen Flood. Around 75 policy practitioners, MPP alumni, faculty, staff, and friends were in attendance. The event was sponsored by ITC Holdings, Public Policy Associates, Citizens Research Council of Michigan, Anderson Economic Group, and the Lansing Economic Development Corporation.

"This year's graduating cohort is relatively small. But this moment highlights one of the core strengths that we have in our MPP program, which is intentionally small cohorts that allow for faculty mentorship, individualized instruction, and deep engagement with applied policy work," said MPP Director

Assistant Professor Marty Jordan. "Over the past eight months, that's what our students have been doing. They're engaging with complex policy challenges."

Josh Lake's research was titled "Crossing the Finish Line, But Missing the Mark: The Growing Gap between Graduation & Competency in Michigan High Schools." The project examined the paradox of rising high school graduation rates alongside declining proficiency in English and math scores in Michigan.

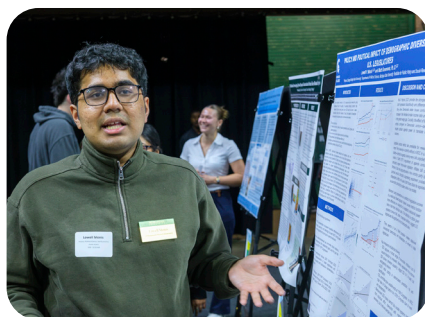
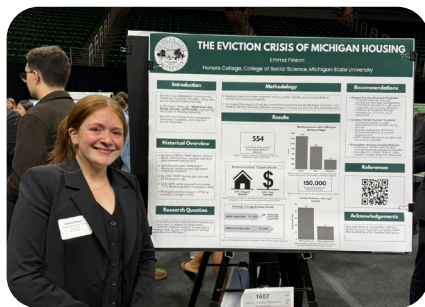
For his project, "When Youth Speak, Do Budgets Listen? Evidence from Malawi," Aubrey Ghambi analyzed policy responsiveness by comparing actual Malawian budget priorities with youth policy preferences.

Michael Oriyavong offered a normative policy analysis of the three types of mail-in voting systems across the U.S. states in his project, "In Mail Ballots, We Trust! Policy Evaluation of Mail Voting Systems."

In "Upzoning and Affordable Housing," Luke Bingaman studied zoning policies in large U.S. cities and their relationship to housing affordability and urban density.

And in a first for the MPP program, Charles Vroman employed synthetic control modeling for his research into the effects of right-to-work laws on private-sector employment and wage growth. His project was entitled, "Right for Workers? Effects of Right-to-Work on Private Sector Labor Market Outcomes in Michigan and Indiana."

"They are doing sophisticated work," Dr. Jordan said in his remarks to graduating students. "Applied policy research is demanding work. It is demanding conceptually, methodologically, communicatively. But this difficulty is precisely where its value lies. Each of you is leaving this program as a skilled professional who's about to make meaningful contributions to the policy world, and you should be proud of your accomplishments. We certainly are."



## PLS students shine at University Undergraduate Research and Arts Forum

Three Political Science students were among the winners at MSU's 28th annual University Undergraduate Research and Arts Forum (UURAF) on April 17. Students presented a wide array of research projects in the form of posters and presentations. More than 190 students from the College of Social Science participated.

Students presented work from research projects and studies they have been working on throughout the academic year. They were supported in their research and mentored by MSU-affiliated faculty, staff, post-doctoral fellows, graduate students, and student research assistants. Several students presented more than one research project across multiple disciplines.

Held each Spring inside the Breslin Center, UURAF brings together a university-wide community of undergraduates to share their work with faculty, staff, peers, and external audiences. Participants gain experience in presenting their research, answering questions about their work from audience members and guests, and receiving constructive feedback from judges.

Overall, 28 students from the College of Social Science were honored with awards at the UURAF Awards Ceremony on April 24. First-place award recipients are eligible to submit their work for consideration for the UURAF Grand Prize, whose winners will be announced in mid-June.

In the Digital Humanities category, PLS students **Emily Porco** and **Rithi Aree** won first place for "Using An AI Chatbot to Address Housing Insecurity." Low-income renters in the United States often face eviction without legal help, while most landlords can afford attorneys and many tenants do not fully understand their rights. Porco's and Aree's project, which was completed alongside MSU students Roberto Garcia and Sumaiya Imad, aims to address that gap by creating an AI chatbot that uses housing laws and court cases to help renters quickly and cheaply learn about their legal protections. They were mentored by MSU Associate Professor of History John Waller, who is Director of the Social Science Scholars Program.

My favorite part of this research project was for us to be able to actually make a large impact with today's abilities through AI," Aree said..

"My favorite part is all of the different people that we brought together to make this," Porco added. "We have lawyers, the Tenant Resource Center, we have the tenants themselves, and then we have undergrad students and law students. Seeing everyone come together for this cause has been really inspiring."

In the History, Political Science, and Economics category, PLS student **Lowell Monis** won first place for his presentation, "Policy Impact of Demographic Diversity in United States Legislatures." Monis' study examines whether the US Congress and state legislatures reflect the diversity of the US public by looking at race, ethnicity, and gender among lawmakers. The findings suggest that legislatures with more women pass more laws, that state legislatures often lead Congress in minority representation, and that greater diversity can improve both representation and some economic outcomes, although competition in larger states may limit these effects. Monis' research mentor was PLS Professor Matt Grossmann.

Other PLS students presenting at UURAF included Victoria Bucher, Trevin Bathgate, Jewl Markle, and Emma Pinson.

## Four PLS students named the newest Katosh Scholars

Four MSU Department of Political Science students are recipients of the Jack Katosh Scholarships to assist MSU students in research, education, study abroad, and ROTC programs.

Katosh, a PLS alumnus and long-time public opinion researcher, announced the generous gift in Fall 2024, creating the awards, which were worth \$8,500 each this year, to give back to his MSU roots.

"The seeds to my career were embedded in me at Michigan State," Katosh said. "Now I'm in a position where I've had a good career, invested well, and at a point in my life where I'm able to 'give back' in a hopefully meaningful way. Each of the scholarships is geared to mirror some aspect of my career."



**Tomas Feldmann Tonelli**, originally from Brazil, is a Political Science major and winner of the **American Government scholarship**.

"This award is very meaningful to me because it shows that my research in American government is recognized and appreciated. As someone who will be applying to Economics PhD programs, being recognized through research is especially encouraging. I also genuinely enjoyed...learning more about the presidential nomination process, so receiving this award makes the experience even more rewarding," Tomas said.

Tonelli was nominated by Associate Professor Ian Ostrander, PLS Graduate Program Director, who has worked with Tonelli for two years.

"He is one of the top- 5 coders that I have had while running teams of coders for over 15 years. Tomas has helped me on several projects in the past two years," said Prof. Ostrander. "He follows

coding instructions, understands issues related to reliability, and has worked to clean data. He even offers suggestions on coding improvements."



**Liam Connor**, a Political Science Scholar, is a Political Science Pre-Law major with minors in Law, Justice & Public Policy and Environmental Social Science. He was the

recipient of the **Undergraduate Research & Experiential Learning Scholarship**, for which he was nominated by Assistant Professor Marty Jordan. "Liam is always actively engaged, on-time, and present for our classes and guest speakers. He really is exceptional!" Prof. Jordan said.

"I've had the privilege of meeting Jack Katosh (and his partner Mary). Liam is EXACTLY the type of student he would like to fund -- bright, hardworking, tolerant, civil, thoughtful...and so many other positive adjectives," Jordan said.

"It is truly an honor to be recognized by Mr. Katosh. I'm so grateful for his generosity and support of my education. I would also like to thank Professor Marty Jordan and [Associate Professor] Eric Juenke for nominating me. I also must thank my family and God for supporting me throughout my career. I couldn't do it without them. Go Green!" Connor said.



**Rory Brewer**, recipient of the **ROTC award**, earned an associate's degree from Valley Forge Military College before joining MSU as a Political Science major. He was nominated for

the award by Assistant Professor Melissa O'Shea, who has worked with Rory for two years on legal writing and analysis.

"Rory is always willing to volunteer to answer questions, whether in a large lecture or small one, especially when no one else is willing to volunteer," Prof. O'Shea said.

"It is an honor to receive the Katosh Award in recognition of my commitment to both ROTC and Political Science. This distinction further motivates me to pursue excellence in my academic career and future service in the Army," Brewer said.



Finally, **Noelle Whorf** was selected for the **2026-27 Jack Katosh D.C. Study Away Award**, which will support her internship with the U.S. Department of the Interior in

Washington through the William A. Demmer Scholars Program. She was nominated by John Waller, director of the Social Science Scholars program and associate professor in the Department of History.

"Noelle is a superb student ...She writes clearly, with some flair, and with a strong grasp of the importance of high-quality evidence. She also has substantial research experience," Prof. Waller said.

"Alumni like Jack Katosh represent the best of the Spartan community. Because of his support, I'm able to fully invest in the work that matters to me and make the most of this opportunity in D.C. I'm so grateful for the chance to carry what I've learned over the past three years into the federal policymaking space," Whorf said.

# Five Political Science PhD students awarded for their work, writing and service

A record number of Political Science PhD students were awarded departmental prizes for their writing, teaching, and service this year.

These awards are given to the top graduate students each Spring, based on nominations from Political Science faculty and determined by the Graduate Studies Committee.



The **Best Graduate Paper Award** was won by **Fariha Tabassum** for “Intraparty Violence: A Refined Conceptualization and Evidence from Africa and South

Asia.” In this paper, Tabassum develops a new way of understanding political violence by focusing on violence that occurs within political parties rather than only between rival parties. Using data from 25 countries in Africa and South Asia, she shows that this “intraparty violence” is both common and distinct from other forms of political violence, especially in dominant-party systems where competition within the ruling party is intense.

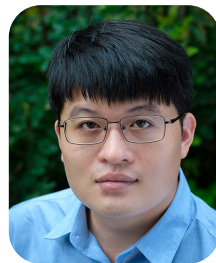
“This is a truly outstanding paper and richly deserving of the Best Paper Award. It showcases Ms. Tabassum’s exceptional capacity for conceptual innovation. In my experience, I have never advised a student who approaches political concepts with the same level of rigor and seriousness,” wrote MSU PLS Associate Professor Dr. Michael Wahman in his nomination letter.



Also winning **Best Paper** is **Tosin Salau** for “Citizens’ Unrest: Understanding Civilian Cooperation with Militant Groups Amid

Subsidy Reductions.” In this paper, Salau examines how government subsidy cuts can increase civilian frustration and lead some people to cooperate with militant groups. Using both cross-national evidence and a case study of Nigeria, she argues that civilians are not simply passive victims of conflict, but active participants whose decisions can shape conflict dynamics in important ways.

“Salau introduces a nuanced theoretical framework that not only shifts the spotlight onto civilians as strategic actors but does so across a broad spectrum, encompassing cross-country analysis and delving deep into a specific case study of Nigeria. This dual approach enables a comprehensive exploration of civilian agency, revealing how civilians negotiate their involvement with rebel groups in response to government policies,” wrote Associate Professors Shahryar Minhas and Andrew Kerner in their recommendation.



With three nominations, the winner of the **Best Teaching Award** was **Li-Hong Weng**, who organized and led departmental methods

workshops and worked as a teaching assistant for PLS 322 (Comparative Legal Systems) and PLS 202 (Introduction to Data Analytics and the Social Sciences). Weng was nominated by PLS faculty Dr. Minhas, Assistant Professor Sivaram Cheruvu, and Assistant Professor Andrew Halterman.

“Having watched Li-Hong teach for a couple years now, I’ve noticed a few traits about him that make him an excellent teacher. First, as anyone who’s worked with him knows, he’s hardworking, organized, and diligent. But more specifically as an instructor, I’ve noticed the thoughtfulness with which he engages with students. Good teaching always involves a great deal of empathy

and kindness: as a teacher, you have to put yourself in the mind of someone who does not yet know the material you’re teaching. Li-Hong clearly does this, in his accessible and detailed materials, but especially in the way he talks with students, draws them out, and helps develop their understanding,” wrote Dr. Halterman.

**Service Awards** this year went to **Paige Haight** for her support during the Political Science Alumni Conference and **Alexandra Stinson-Swartout** for going “above and beyond” as the president of the Graduate Student Association.



“This award was created to recognize those students who make a significant impact on the PLS community above and beyond normal, reasonable, and perhaps healthy expectations. Paige met this criterion helping me to prep, implement, and plan the 2025 PLS PhD Alumni Conference,” wrote Graduate Program Director and Associate Professor Ian Ostrander.

Dr. Ostrander also nominated Stinson-Swartout, stating that she was the inspiration for the creation of the new award category with all the work she did to create a graduate student lounge and library. She was also integral in the Department winning the 2025 MSU Graduate School’s Outstanding Program Community Award.

“We need people like Alex to keep a community together, which takes more than just having an absurd level of extroversion (though it helps). But the work maintaining a community is often thankless and underappreciated. Alex’s efforts on behalf of PLS were a big reason we won the Program award,” Dr. Ostrander wrote.



PLS majors Alexandra Beck (left) and Lowell Monis (right)



## Two PLS students win awards in the Diversity Research Showcase

PLS majors Alexandra Beck and Lowell Monis took home prizes in this year’s 9th Annual Diversity Research Showcase, hosted by the MSU Honors College.

Beck won second prize and \$600 in the oral presentation category with her research, “Birth and Barriers: Examining Perinatal Mental Health and Opioid Crisis and Treatment Availability.” A third-year student in the Honors College, Beck is majoring in Public Policy and in Neuroscience in Lyman Briggs College. Her research mentor is Professor of Epidemiology & Biostatistics Claire Margerison, from the College of Human Medicine.

“For this project, I have developed a methodology to create a database of perinatal mental health providers in California,” Beck wrote.

Monis won second prize and \$600 in the poster presentation category with his research, “The Chance to Buy an Illegal Drug: Disparities in Exposure Across Race-Ethnicity Subgroups Over Time, 2002–2024.” Monis is also a third-year World Politics student, with other majors in Data Science and Computational & Applied Mathematics. He is also a member of the Honors College, and

his research mentor is Professor of Epidemiology & Biostatistics James C. Anthony, from the College of Human Medicine.

“My main aim is to estimate the occurrence of drug purchase opportunities with attention to variation across United States Census Bureau-defined race-ethnicity subgroups,” Monis wrote. Monis’ results show that people in different communities do not have the same opportunities to buy drugs. The study suggests that simply having access or exposure to drug-selling environments is an important factor in explaining differences in drug use across places and groups of people.”

The Diversity Research Showcase provides MSU undergraduates space to discuss their research with peers, faculty, and staff in a supportive and constructive atmosphere.

This year included roughly 40 undergraduate participants across poster and oral presentation categories. Both Honors and non-Honors students brought new perspectives on research topics such as fast fashion, art as medicine, prenatal care, modern supply chains, and AI breast cancer detection, among others.

Also presenting this year was Political Science Pre-law third-year A’Nyah Banta, whose research project was entitled “Policies That Can Effectively Address the Neglect of Mental Health Care Among Incarcerated Populations.” Banta’s research mentor was Associate Professor John Waller from History.

Provost Laura Lee McIntyre congratulated the presenters on “pushing the bounds of research and understanding, and leading the way to real-world impact.”

“Thank you to the Honors College and their campus-wide partners who have supported your work and helped make this opportunity possible,” Dr. McIntyre said in virtual remarks.

Erika Crews, the Honors College director of student success and community engagement, was a main organizer of the showcase.

“Diversity research helps us better understand the realities of our communities and the systems that shape them,” Crews said. “Especially now, funding this work is a meaningful investment in rigorous scholarship that informs practice and contributes to more equitable outcomes.”

# Our mission and how to give

We seek to evaluate, innovate, and invigorate political processes/institutions across our research, teaching, and service.

## GIVING INFORMATION

For more information on how to support students and programs at MSU Political Science, please contact:

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