

# SERENA LAWS

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Department of Political Science  
Trinity College  
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## ACADEMIC POSITIONS

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*Senior Lecturer*, Department of Political Science, Trinity College, Hartford, CT  
(2019-present)

- Courses Taught: American National Government, Political Science Research Methods, American Welfare State, Social Inequality in the United States, Debt and American Citizenship, Community Action Gateway, Tax Policy and Inequality in Hartford, COVID-19 and the American State

*Visiting Assistant Professor and Visiting Lecturer*, Department of Political Science, Trinity College, Hartford, CT (2013-2019)

*Visiting Scholar*, Department of Political Science, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD (2011-2013)

*Postdoctoral Fellow*, Rockefeller Center for Public Policy, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH (2009-2011)

- Managed the *Policy Research Shop*, supervising undergraduates doing non-partisan policy research for New Hampshire and Vermont legislators
- Taught courses in the Public Policy Minor

## EDUCATION

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Ph.D., University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, Political Science (2011)

M.A., University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, Political Science (2007)

B.A., Amherst College, Women's and Gender Studies, *Magna Cum Laude* (2001)

## COMMUNITY LEARNING EXPERIENCE

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- Director, Trinity College VITA Tax Clinic at Trinfo Café (Spring 2019-present)
  - IRS-Certified Site Coordinator of Trinity's Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) clinic

- Developed “Experiential Certificate” program to expand and deepen the program into a multi-semester student experience with academic, research, and community learning components
- Community Learning Research Fellows, Faculty Advisor (Fall 2018)
- Community Engagement Working Group (Spring 2018)
- Liberal Arts Action Lab, Faculty Advisor (Spring 2018)
- Liberal Arts Action Lab Advisory Committee (Spring 2017)
- Courses with Community Learning Components, Trinity College
  - POLS 310 (formerly CLIC 290), *Tax Policy and Inequality in Hartford* (Spring 2019, Spring 2020)
  - CACT 101, *Community Action Gateway* (Fall 2017, Fall 2018)
  - POLS 242, *Political Science Research Methods* (Spring 2016, Spring 2017, Fall 2017, Spring 2019)
  - POLS 348 (later POLS 222), *Social Inequality in the United States* (Fall 2013; Fall 2014; Fall 2016)
  - POLS 241, *Empirical Political Methods & Data Analysis* (Fall 2013; Fall 2014; Fall 2015)

## PUBLICATIONS AND MANUSCRIPTS

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- Serena Laws, “The Free-Market Family: How the Market Crushed the American Dream (and How It Can Be Restored). By Maxine Eichner.” Book Review for *Perspectives on Politics* 18(4), December 2020.
- Serena Laws, “What Kind of Relief? Consumer Bankruptcy and the American Safety Net” *New Political Science* 42(3), September 2020.
  - This article is an examination of the institution of consumer bankruptcy as site for debt relief, drawing on interviews and a survey with the street-level bureaucrats of the consumer bankruptcy system.
- Serena Laws, with Michael Sanchez and Rick D’Amato “The Justice Gap: Legal Needs of New Hampshire’s Low-Income Residents” *Policy Research Shop* (2012).
- Robin Datta, Serena Laws, Steven Williams, Russell Mayer. 2008 APSA Teaching and Learning Conference Track Summaries, Track Nine: Civic Engagement II. [\*PS: Political Science & Politics\*](#) (July 2008).
- Sean Boutin, David Brodsky, Serena Laws, Russ Mayer, Maria Rost Rublee. 2007 APSA Teaching and Learning Conference Track Summaries, Track Five: Assessment I. [\*PS: Political Science & Politics\*](#) 40(3): 575-588.

#### ARTICLES IN PROGRESS:

- “Policy Feedback and Tax Credits: Rethinking Invisibility in the Submerged State”
  - This paper explores the potential policy feedback effects of tax credits such as the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) on low-income Americans based on fieldwork at a free tax clinic.
- “What Do Debtors Deserve? The Social Construction of Debtors in American Bankruptcy Reform”
  - This paper systematically analyzes the political discourse around debtors and indebtedness that emerged during the congressional debate over the 2005 Bankruptcy Abuse Prevention and Consumer Protection Act (BAPCPA).
- “Racialized Debt Relief: Assessing Racial Variation in Aggression Toward Debtors in the Consumer Bankruptcy System”
  - This paper examines data from interviews and an original survey of frontline workers in the consumer bankruptcy system—an important but under-appreciated part of the federal safety net—to assess whether race plays a role in their behavior toward debtors.
- “The Effects of the Profit Motive Among Bankruptcy’s Street-Level Bureaucrats”
  - The paper presents findings from interviews and an original survey of private bankruptcy trustees that reveal some of the perverse consequences of trustee’s pay incentives.
- “Debt and American Citizenship”
  - Drawing on Judith Shklar’s theory of citizenship as standing, this article considers the historical relationship between personal debt and American citizenship, from indentured servitude and sharecropping to modern forms of debt and the credit score, arguing that debt and citizen standing have been intertwined throughout American history, with negative associations in the past, and a combination of negative and positive associations in the present.

#### BOOK MANUSCRIPT IN PROGRESS:

- *Bankrupt: Debt Relief and the New American Welfare State*

This book makes the case that the institution of consumer bankruptcy is an important piece of the American social safety net, and uses a thorough examination of the bankruptcy system as an opportunity to critically reflect on the adequacy of the American welfare state as a whole. In an era of widespread personal indebtedness and high levels of financial insecurity, assessing the main federal mechanism for debt relief becomes critically important. Placing bankruptcy alongside other federal programs responding to those in financial distress such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Unemployment Insurance, and the Earned Income Tax Credit I find that bankruptcy exemplifies many features of the present-day welfare state, including a reliance on private actors and an emphasis on market logic, an individualized (as opposed to collective) notion of relief and deservingness, and a paternalistic approach to those in financial need. Considering bankruptcy as a welfare state program reveals both failures of

the welfare state as a whole as well as the unique challenges of providing relief specifically for personal debt. Using multiple sources of qualitative and quantitative data, including interviews and an original survey of bankruptcy officials, I find the institution of consumer bankruptcy wanting as a mechanism for relief in many ways.

## CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

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- “COVID-19 and the New Safety Net: Shifting Political Terrain for Federal Debt Relief.” Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association in Seattle, September 2021 (Virtual).
- “Effects of Low Income Tax Credits: Rethinking Invisibility in the Submerged State” Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western Political Science Association, April 2021 (Virtual).
- “Catch-all and Last Resort: Consumer Bankruptcy’s Place in the American Welfare State.” Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western Political Science Association, April, 2020 (Virtual).
- “What Do Debtors Deserve? The Social Construction of Debtors in American Bankruptcy Reform.” Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association in Washington, DC, September, 2019.
- “Policy Feedback and Tax Credits: Rethinking Invisibility in the Submerged State.” Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western Political Science Association, San Diego, CA, April, 2019.
- “Racialized Debt Relief: Assessing Street-Level Behavior and Race in the Consumer Bankruptcy System.” Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association in San Francisco, CA, September, 2017 and the Annual Meeting of the Western Political Science Association, Vancouver, BC, April, 2017.
- “Profit from Administration: Examining Bankruptcy’s Street-Level Bureaucrats.” Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association Philadelphia, PA, September 2016.
- “The Effects of the Profit Motive Among Bankruptcy’s Street-Level Bureaucrats.” Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, April 2016.
- “Debt and American Citizenship.” Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, April 2016.
- “The New American Welfare State: Consumer Bankruptcy as Case Study.” Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association in San Francisco, CA, September, 2015.

- “Citizen Repayers: Representations of Debt Since the Great Recession.” Presented at the Western Political Science Association Meeting in Seattle, WA, April, 2014.
- “Private Bureaucrats: Representative Bureaucracy in the Consumer Bankruptcy System.” Presented at Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, April 2014.
- “Bankruptcy as Welfare: Bankruptcy’s Place in the American Social Safety Net.” Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association in Seattle, WA, September, 2011.
- “Political Effects of Debt and Bankruptcy Filing.” Presented at the Western Political Science Association Meeting in San Antonio, TX, April, 2011.
- “Bankruptcy Stigma and its Political Effects: The Social Construction of Debtors in Bankruptcy Policy.” Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Northeastern Political Science Association, Boston, MA, November, 2010.
- “Bankruptcy Reform in a Neoliberal Social Policy Context.” Presented at Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, April 2010.
- “Access to Bankruptcy, Access to Justice: Legal Access as a Factor in Consumer Bankruptcy Filing Rates.” Presented at Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, April 2009.
- “The Strange Career of Poverty Rights in the United States.” Presented at the Joint Annual Meeting of the Law and Society Association and the Canadian Law and Society Association, Montreal, Canada, May, 2008.
- “Legal Aid, Medicaid, and Differential Citizenship in the Federal Welfare State.” Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, April 2008.
- “Poverty Rights in the States: Court interventions in Health Care and Education” (co-author Elizabeth Beaumont). Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western Political Science Association, San Diego, CA, March 2008.
- “Knowledge as Citizen Engagement: Using Current Events in Introductory Political Science Courses,” (co-author Jennifer Rutledge). Presented at the APSA Teaching and Learning Conference, San Jose, CA, February, 2008.

## PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

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- American Political Science Association
  - Public Policy Section

- Class and Inequality Section
- Western Political Science Association

## FELLOWSHIPS AND AWARDS

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- Digital Scholarship Fellow, Trinity College, 2018-2019 Academic Year
- Student Research Program Fellowship, Trinity College, Summer 2018 (\$3,500 for Research Assistant)
- Center for Teaching and Learning Fellow, Trinity College, 2017-2018 Academic Year.
- Community Learning Initiative Course Development Grant, Summer 2017 (\$1,000)
- Faculty Research Grant, Trinity College, Hartford, CT. 2016-2017 Academic Year (\$2,535 for research-related travel expenses)
- Student Research Program Fellowship, Trinity College 2016-2017 Academic Year (\$3,500 for Research Assistant)
- TIIIS Junior Faculty Fellowship, Fall and Spring, 2015 (\$150 per semester)
- Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship, University of Minnesota (2008-2009)
- Thesis Research Grant, University of Minnesota (2008)
- Horowitz Foundation for Social Policy Grant (2007)
- Graduate Research Partnership Program Grant, with Prof. Elizabeth Beaumont (2007)
- Political Science Summer Fellowship (2007)
- Ueland Fellowship (2006)
- Amherst College Graduate Fellowship (2003-2006)
- Vernie Wolfsberg Foundation Fellowship (2004, 2005)
- National Merit Scholarship (1997)

## METHODOLOGICAL AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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- Organizer of “Debt, Credit, and American Politics” virtual workshop (Fall 2020-present)
  - This virtual colloquium brings together prominent political scientists from across the country working on the politics of personal debt and credit in the United States.
- “Methods Studio” Short Course participant, Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Philadelphia, PA, September 2016.
- Short Course on DA-RT Standards and Implementation, Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association in San Francisco, CA, September, 2015.
- “Categorical Data Analysis: Models for Binary, Ordinal, Nominal, and Count Outcomes.” Short Course with J. Scott Long at the *Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR)*. Ann Arbor, MI, June 2009 (1 week)
- *Law and Society Graduate Student Workshop*, Montreal, Canada, May, 2008 (2 days)
- *Preparing Future Faculty Certificate*, University of Minnesota (2 semester course sequence; completed December, 2007)
- *Institute for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research*, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ, January, 2007 (2 weeks)
- Graduate Courses in Research Methods, University of Minnesota (2003-2006)
  - Qualitative Research Methods (Political Science)
  - Intermediate Social Statistics (Sociology)
  - Advanced Social Statistics (Sociology)

## COMMITTEE WORK AND INSTITUTIONAL SERVICE

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*Library & Information Technology Committee*, Trinity College, Hartford, CT (elected, Spring 2021-Spring 2023)

*Task Force on the Status of Women at Trinity*, Trinity College, Hartford, CT (Fall 2019-present)

*Advising Coordinator, Graduate Program in Public Policy*, Trinity College, Hartford, CT (Spring 2018-Spring 2020)

*Community Engagement Working Group*, Trinity College, Hartford, CT (Spring 2018)

*Liberal Arts Action Lab Advisory Committee*, Trinity College, Hartford, CT (Spring 2017)

*Social Sciences Policy and Review Council*, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities:

- *Graduate Student Representative*, Course Proposals Committee, 2006-2007

*Department of Political Science*, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities:

- *Graduate Student Representative* (elected), Graduate Work Committee, 2005-2007
  - Worked with faculty on policies relevant to political science graduate students.
- *Committee Chair*, Teaching Committee, 2006-2007
  - Organized workshops around pedagogical issues for graduate students.
- *Committee Chair*, Ph.D. Support Committee, 2005-2006
  - Organized professional development workshops for graduate students.

## REFERENCES

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