



TOBIN PROJECT UPDATE

2018

Scholars Present Chapter Proposals for *When Democracy Breaks*

Observers have warned that polarization, paralysis, and distrust in government threaten to undermine democratic processes in the United States and abroad. Yet the implications of recent events remain difficult to assess. Despite growing anxiety about the erosion of democratic norms, we lack a clear understanding of the common factors that have led to the failure of democracies throughout history.

What are the conditions that lead to democratic collapse, and what can we do to safeguard against them? To address this question, the Tobin Project is working to produce a volume, *When Democracy Breaks*, that will investigate past moments of democratic crisis. Each of

the book's chapters will focus on a specific instance of democratic breakdown and explore the factors that led to decline. Through rigorous, comparative historical analysis, the volume aims to determine why democracies fail and offer lessons for how a robust democracy can be sustained over time.

This September, the Tobin Project gathered contributors for a workshop where participants presented chapter proposals on nine instances of democratic breakdown and explored the core elements that led to collapse in each case. Guided by the volume's co-editors, Archon Fung (*Winthrop Lafin McCormack Professor of Citizenship and Self-Government, Harvard Kennedy School*), David Moss (*Paul Whiton Cherington Professor of Business*

Administration, Harvard Business School), and Arne Westad (*S.T. Lee Professor of U.S.-Asia Relations, Harvard Kennedy School*), the group identified recurring themes across the cases and discussed next steps for the volume.

At a moment when understanding threats to democracy seems especially pressing, this conversation led to a number of remarkable insights, and we look forward to convening additional discussions as the scholars work to develop their chapters. We believe this volume could prove enormously valuable, and we hope it will meaningfully engage scholars, students, and policymakers in the question of how democracy works and what we can do to prevent its breakdown.



Potential *When Democracy Breaks* Chapters

- Athens between 413 and 403 BCE
- The U.S. South in the lead-up to the Civil War
- Japan in the 1930s
- Weimar Germany
- Cold War-era Czechoslovakia
- 1970s Argentina
- The 1973 Chilean coup d'état
- Russia throughout the 1990s and early 2000s
- The contemporary consolidation of power under Turkey's AKP

← Co-editors Archon Fung, David Moss, and Arne Westad discuss a chapter proposal for *When Democracy Breaks*.

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- A working group meeting on the *History of American Democracy*
- An interview with *National Security* initiative scholar leaders Jeremi Suri, Benjamin Valentino, and Arne Westad
- The Tobin Project celebrates the tenth anniversary of its graduate student programming

Connecting Problem-Oriented Research to Case-Based Teaching

As authors have continued to develop their chapters for *When Democracy Breaks*, the Tobin Project has asked them to consider potentially translating these chapters, once complete, into teachable case studies. This would be part of a broader effort to create new cases on the basis of problem-oriented scholarship. We believe that case-based teaching has the potential to enhance learning by actively engaging students in course material as well as to advance the Tobin Project's mission by fostering problem-oriented research. New cases focused on democratic collapse, for instance, have the potential to encourage both students and scholars to critically engage with questions about the essential elements of healthy democracies and the threats they face.

Our interest in creating cases stems in part from the success of David Moss's *History of American Democracy* course, which uses the case method to explore critical moments in American history. Professor Moss's course, developed with help and encouragement from the Tobin Project, was among the highest-rated at Harvard College when it was offered between 2013 and 2015. Since then, Professor Moss and a team at Harvard Business School have adapted the case-based curriculum for high school students and introduced it into high schools around the country. Responses from both students and teachers have been overwhelmingly positive. Tobin remains interested in bringing cases from the original course to new audiences.

As just one example, Professor James Sparrow, who attended Tobin's 2017 Conference on the *History of American Democracy* and serves as Master in the Social Sciences Collegiate Division at the University of Chicago, is planning to incorporate several of Moss's cases into a new flagship course at Chicago. The course will debut in Spring 2019.

Looking forward, Tobin is interested in collaborating with interested scholars from our network to create new cases based on research across our initiatives. We are eager to develop this work and are excited by the potential of case creation to advance the Tobin Project's mission.

Tobin Convenes Working Group Meeting on the *History of American Democracy*

Conventional theories of American democracy often focus on a few formal institutions of government as the essential mechanisms by which democracy operates. These accounts also frequently portray actions at the national level as the main drivers of democratic change. Closer examination, however, reveals that myriad formal and informal institutions are at work in the achievement of democratic outcomes, and key developments have occurred at least as frequently at the state and local levels of government as in the nation's capital.

In May 2018, as part of its efforts to establish a new field on the history of American democracy, the Tobin Project's *Institutions of Democracy* initiative convened a working group of historians, economists, and legal scholars to discuss new work aimed at moving beyond conventional historical narratives and building deeper understanding of the institutions, norms, and practices that have shaped American democracy over time, with the goal of developing a better understanding of how democracy actually works.

The meeting opened with presentations of recent scholarship by Naomi Lamoreaux (*Stanley B. Resor Professor of Economics and History, Yale University*), Laura Edwards (*Peabody Family Professor of History in Trinity College of Arts and Sciences, Duke University*), and Maggie McKinley (*Assistant Professor of Law, University of Pennsylvania Law School*), who proposed the working group following Tobin's 2017 *History of American Democracy* conference. They credit the conference with demonstrating the importance of new interdisciplinary scholarship examining how democratic institutions have operated and how individuals and groups have achieved democratic outcomes over the course of American history. Following the presentations, meeting participants shared and workshopped short write-ups of possible new research in this field.

The group also discussed several related project ideas, including the possibility of creating new curricular content for secondary and college students, identifying legal and policy issues on which new scholarship could have particular bearing, and creating systems for making new research on the history of American democracy broadly available.



↑ Martha Jones (*Society of Black Alumni Presidential Professor and Professor of History, Johns Hopkins University*) presents potential research during the working group meeting on the *History of American Democracy*.

Laura Edwards on Teaching the *History of American Democracy*

As a panelist at the Tobin Project’s 2017 Conference on the *History of American Democracy* and a leader of the May 2018 working group meeting on the subject, Laura Edwards (*Peabody Family Professor of History in Trinity College of Arts and Sciences, Duke University*) has contributed significantly to the Tobin Project’s efforts to better understand how Americans have addressed the challenges of democratic governance since the country’s founding. Last spring, she also debuted an introductory history course at Duke University entitled, “History of American Democracy.” In a recent conversation with Tobin, Professor Edwards shared her thoughts on the new course and the importance of teaching and conducting research in this field.

Q: What inspired you to adopt the “History of American Democracy” title for your course at Duke?

A: [At Duke], we saw a need for a course that would cover the basics in U.S. government, what with the curriculum at the secondary level dropping coverage of civics and government. I had just been to [the 2017 Tobin Conference on the *History of American Democracy*], and was inspired to frame a course around the question of democracy: If we want to know what it is, then we have to know its past.

Q: What do you think is the value of studying the history of American democracy?

A: [At this moment in time], democracy seems less like a description of something we think we already know and more like a question that requires careful thought. What is democracy? What is its history? How did governance in the United States work? How did people try to influence the shape of the public order? We know

surprisingly little about those issues. In my own work, for instance, I have studied the ways that ordinary people—including people without the full range of rights—participated in the legal system in the period between the Revolution and the Civil War. . . . In this context, what is the history of democracy? It is not just about a history of access, which is usually told with the presumption that access was restricted and then increased over time. It is much more complicated. Given the issues that we are facing today, we need to come to terms with that deeply conflicted, complicated past in order to chart our future course.

Q: What are the organizing ideas, concerns, or themes of the course?

A: The course focuses on: the changing institutional structure of government; people’s expectations about what government should be and do; and their efforts to shape decisions about public policy. There are several key themes that we explore over time. The first involves questions about the people’s relationship to their government: Who can make claims on government? By what logic can they make claims? Who is excluded? . . . The second involves questions about the changing institutional structures: What issues did different levels of government (local, state, national) deal with? How did that change over time? . . . The third theme involves questions about policies: Whose interests take precedence in formulating public policy? What is the public interest?

Q: How have students responded to the course?

A: I taught the course last spring semester and will teach it again this coming spring semester. The students were very receptive.



↑ Laura Edwards (*Peabody Family Professor of History in Trinity College of Arts and Sciences, Duke University*)

Most were freshmen, were politically engaged, and were eager to have more insight into current dynamics that seemed to require urgent action and yet seemed so overwhelming as to be beyond their control. . . . Posing democracy as a question opened up the issues for them—and they ran with it.

Q: Has teaching the history of American democracy influenced how you approach your own research?

A: I now see how much I do not know about the institutional development of our country; about people’s expectations of government; and the various means that they used to shape policy. The past has become much more important—and much more relevant to me than it ever has been before.

The Tobin Project Awards Its 2018 Prize for Exemplary Work on Inequality and Decision Making

The Tobin Project is pleased to announce the winners of the 2018 Prize for Exemplary Work on Inequality and Decision Making: Orestes Patterson Hastings (Assistant Professor of Sociology, Colorado State University) and Daniel Schneider (Assistant Professor of Sociology, University of California, Berkeley). Their paper with Joe LaBriola, “Income Inequality and Class Divides in Parental Investments,” represents pioneering research that Tobin believes will help lead to a deeper understanding of the effects of inequality on individual behavior and how these effects may influence our democracy, economy, and society more broadly.

Tobin will formally present the prize to Hastings and Schneider at our 2019 Conference on *Inequality and Decision Making*. The conference, which will be held in April, seeks to build on research that examines the micro-level effects of inequality, asking: how can scholars demonstrate a link between changes in inequality and changes in individual behavior, and what research would illuminate how those behavioral shifts may result in macro-level consequences? Hastings and Schneider’s work represents one step forward in answering these questions, and we hope that the conference will further develop a community of scholars dedicated to studying this critical issue.

The winners of the prize were selected by a committee of leading scholars of inequality: Nancy Adler (*Lisa and John Pritzker Professor of Medical Psychology, University of California, San Francisco*), Marianne Bertrand (*Chris P. Dialynas Distinguished Service Professor of Economics, University of Chicago Booth School of Business*), and Christopher Jencks (*Malcolm Wiener Professor of Social Policy, Emeritus, Harvard Kennedy School*). Following the selection, we spoke to the prize winners about their research and its significance within the field of inequality and decision making.

Q: What was your motivation for pursuing this research?

Schneider: We often say that Americans tolerate a great deal of inequality in outcomes—like income or wealth—in part because Americans really believe

in equality of opportunity. Americans think that every kid really does have a chance to get ahead, to make it.

We sometimes conflate income inequality and intergenerational mobility—but those are different concepts and they are not necessarily related. ... In this project, we wanted to see if there was a link—if this period of historically extreme income inequality in the United States might in fact have served to reduce intergenerational mobility. Our paper doesn’t so much ask if that happened, but how it might happen. One way income inequality might affect mobility is if income inequality changed how families invest in young children. ... Rising income inequality could have led affluent families to spend more on their kids, widening the gap in child investment and then potentially reducing mobility across generations.

Q: What aspects of your findings do you think could have the greatest impact on our understanding of economic inequality?

Schneider: In some ways our big-picture finding strikes me as potentially most useful: we cannot realistically hope to separate inequality of outcomes from



↑ Left: Orestes Patterson Hastings (*Assistant Professor of Sociology, Colorado State University*). Right: Daniel Schneider (*Assistant Professor of Sociology, University of California, Berkeley*).

inequality of opportunity because affluent parents invest so much in ensuring their children’s success.

Hastings: Beyond this specific (and important!) outcome, I think our work highlights how necessary it is to think about how inequality affects different types of people differently. Sometimes we talk about inequality as differences between the rich and poor. And often we talk about it in terms of the overall income distribution. ... But these two ways of thinking about inequality cannot be easily separated. We show how the overall distribution of inequality changes how people in different parts of the income distribution invest in their children, and I think the same idea is true for many outcomes.

Scholars and Policymakers Discuss *Reassessing Threat Assessment*

In August, the Tobin Project’s National Security initiative held a meeting as part of our continuing work on Reassessing Threat Assessment that focuses on the early nuclear era. The broader initiative seeks to build understanding of the practices and processes that yield accurate and reliable assessments of national security risks facing the United States. By examining assessment practices from a period of rapid technological change and geopolitical uncertainty (at the dawn of nuclear weapons), we hope to learn lessons regarding threat assessment that could help policymakers identify and address the most pressing national security challenges we face today.



↑ Bonnie Jenkins (Nonresident Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution; former Ambassador, U.S. State Department) shares feedback during a meeting on *Reassessing Threat Assessment*.

The Tobin Project launched this inquiry in 2017, convening two meetings where scholars first proposed new work and then shared early-stage research. Following the meetings, contributors sought to develop their research with input from initiative scholar leaders: Jeremi Suri (*Mack Brown Distinguished Chair for Leadership in Global Affairs, University of Texas at Austin*), Benjamin Valentino (*Associate Professor of Government, Dartmouth College*), and Arne Westad (*S.T. Lee Professor of U.S.-Asia Relations, Harvard Kennedy School*).

At the most recent meeting, sixteen contributors, including historians, political scientists, and international relations scholars, presented near-final drafts of their working papers, each of which reevaluated a strategic assessment from the twenty-five years following the development of the first nuclear weapons. Participants at the meeting addressed a number of overarching questions, including:

- **What are the characteristics of a “good” threat assessment? What were the organizational and leadership qualities that contributed to high quality assessments?**

- **How did assessors respond to past successes or failures in assessment? Did they “over-learn” the lessons of the past?**
- **How can these case analyses inform today’s assessments?**

The meeting concluded with a panel of policymakers and practitioners who provided feedback on the papers and shared their

thoughts on the implications of this research for contemporary policy and how the contributors could most effectively inform security issues over the long term. We were encouraged by the practitioners’ enthusiastic response to this work and by the rigor of the research presented, and we look forward to working with the contributors and scholar leaders to finalize and submit the papers for publication.

Tobin Partners with the Brookings Institution and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Last January, the Tobin Project partnered with the Brookings Institution and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace to organize the first meeting in a discussion series designed to disseminate new scholarship with important foreign policy implications and facilitate exchange between academics and policymakers. The event featured three panels. Topics included the politics of authoritarianism, leaders and the use of force, and historical perspectives on U.S. grand strategy. We hope that this series will provide an opportunity for academics to share the most recent scholarship on important foreign policy issues and for practitioners to discuss the policy and security challenges that are most in need of further study. We are planning to hold the next meeting in this series this spring, when participants will examine how U.S. grand strategy affects the economic interests of the American middle class.

Jeremi Suri, Benjamin Valentino, and Arne Westad on *Reassessing Threat Assessment*

The Tobin Project's *Reassessing Threat Assessment* inquiry seeks to conduct a critical analysis of past threat assessments, reevaluating them in light of their success or failure, with the ultimate goal of improving the reliability of future assessments and equipping the United States to better employ its limited national security resources. As scholars begin to prepare their research for publication, Tobin spoke with the inquiry's scholar leaders, Jeremi Suri (*Mack Brown Distinguished Chair for Leadership in Global Affairs, University of Texas at Austin*), Benjamin Valentino (*Associate Professor of Government, Dartmouth College*), and Arne Westad (*S.T. Lee Professor of U.S.-Asia Relations, Harvard Kennedy School*).

Q: Why do you think studying threat assessment is important?

Valentino: Threat assessment is the bedrock of U.S. security policy. Without an accurate view of the threats facing our country, of course, it is impossible to plan effectively to respond to those threats.

Westad: We have to grasp how political leaders and intelligence chiefs have understood threats in the past in order to better recognize what influences our current choices and perceptions with regard to potential threats from abroad. The only way to get a better handle on how realistic and accurate current assessments are is by having something to compare them to.

Q: Why is the early nuclear era a particularly fruitful period to research?



↑ Arne Westad, Alexander Lanoszka (*Assistant Professor of International Relations, University of Waterloo*), and Yogesh Joshi (*Stanton Postdoctoral Fellow, Stanford University*) discuss research on *Reassessing Threat Assessment* between paper presentations.

Suri: The early nuclear period is rich with detailed historical sources that we can study in depth. The emergence of nuclear weapons also has many similarities (and differences) with emerging threats in cyberspace and artificial intelligence today.

Valentino: [In 1945], some observers thought that nuclear weapons were essentially just larger conventional weapons. But some people, both within and outside of the U.S. government, began to appreciate the radical implications of nuclear weapons for military strategy and the conduct of international politics. Today, observers have suggested that new technologies like cyber warfare, drones, genetic engineering and artificial intelligence might have similarly revolutionary effects on our world. We can't know for sure what effects these technologies may have, but by looking back at the early nuclear era, we can try to understand how to avoid the mistakes of the past.

Q: What lessons could research on the early nuclear era provide for policy officials or other decision makers?

Suri: There are many lessons highlighted by our research, including the importance of domestic politics, the long lead time from technological innovation to weaponization, and the non-strategic motivations for states adopting new weapons.

Westad: The lessons go in several directions. One is about how and how quickly knowledge of new weapons spread. Another is about the likelihood of using new weapons. A third is about the rapid

expansion of new weapons programs into ever more powerful weapons.

Q: Based on the research produced for the initiative thus far, do you see echoes between challenges from the early nuclear era and contemporary security issues?

Valentino: One key lesson is that threat assessors in the U.S. and elsewhere failed to anticipate the patterns in which nuclear weapons would spread because they failed to understand the motives of states to develop these weapons. We underestimated the desire of countries like Israel and South Africa to build these weapons because we did not believe that either country had a strategic need for them. On the other hand, we overestimated the likelihood that Germany would produce nuclear weapons. We failed to appreciate that domestic political pressures could be more powerful than strategic necessity in these decisions.

Suri: We see many echoes in the domestic controversies surrounding cybersecurity, the challenges of assessing Russian and other adversary intentions, and the pressures to stay technologically ahead of adversaries.



↑ Jeremi Suri and Benjamin Valentino talk between sessions at Tobin's *Reassessing Threat Assessment* meeting.

Research Topics from *Reassessing Threat Assessment*

- British and American Assessments of the Soviet Nuclear Threat, 1945–1954
- South Africa in the Early Nuclear Age
- The Primacy of Domestic Politics in Israeli Assessments of Nuclear Threats in the Early Cold War
- India's Response to Chinese Nuclear Capability, 1964–1974
- U.S. Intelligence Analysis and West German Intentions to Acquire Nuclear Weapons, 1957–1966
- Existential Threats and Nuclear Assessment from the Cold War to the War on Terror

Tobin Celebrates a Decade of Graduate Student Programming

2018 marked the tenth year of the Tobin Project's graduate student programming. Over the past decade, our graduate student workshops have sought to encourage the next generation of scholars to pursue ambitious research focused on the most pressing public problems. Our community of current and former fellows now includes over 150 scholars from seventeen disciplines and thirty-four institutions, many of whom credit Tobin with helping to increase the impact of their work.

Tobin convened its first graduate student forum in April 2009 with the hope that this cohort of doctoral students would “form an interdisciplinary community interested in pursuing questions that might inform new intellectual paradigms and innovative, evidence-based approaches to public policy.” Tobin was, and remains, motivated by the belief that such questions had—and still have—the potential to “inform a research agenda for the next decade.” One member of the original cohort was Adam Chandler, currently an appellate attorney at the Department of Justice. The forum, he said, “pushed against the tendency of graduate education to silo students by school and by discipline. ... [The workshop] demonstrated that, whatever disciplines we had chosen, we were still united in a quest to answer big questions—questions whose answers require more than one discipline, and more than one brain.”

Focusing scholarship on big questions has the power not only to refine students' inquiries, but also to ensure that their research helps address pressing real-world problems. Former Tobin Fellow Joshua Shiffrinson (*Assistant Professor of International Relations, Boston University*) noted that while graduate school provides many opportunities that “teach [you] how to do research or encourage you to undertake policy-relevant work,” Tobin's programming differs because it actually “helps this work come to fruition.” He explained, “That's unique and highly important, especially when graduate students are pressed from many other directions and the priorities can slip.” The focus of Tobin's workshop on public problems was especially valuable to

Kim Lucas, who is currently pursuing a Ph.D. at Brandeis University while serving as the Civic Research Director in the Mayor of Boston's Office of New Urban Mechanics. She shared that thanks in part to her participation in Tobin's graduate student workshop, she arrived at the mayor's office “already understanding the vast and varied ways that social science research and public policy and planning can inform one another.”

Our workshop this past April convened students conducting *National Security* work related to threat assessment. Marika Landau-Wells (*Postdoctoral Research Fellow, MIT*), another alumna of Tobin's graduate student programming, participated in the recent workshop as a discussant and shared, “As a discussant in later workshops, I was always encouraged by the fact that new cohorts of Tobin fellows appeared to be pursuing challenging, interdisciplinary work as well. In the end, I became committed to staying in academia because I decided that being an interdisciplinary scholar was something that I could do and that I'd always have good company.”

Tobin held a second workshop in June focused on the *History of American Democracy*. Jaime Sánchez, Jr. (*Ph.D. candidate, Princeton University*) wrote that the workshop was “the most interdisciplinary forum that I have ever presented my research in,” explaining “this workshop is a rare opportunity to share, learn, and engage with new approaches to the study of democracy. Having to clarify



↑ Jaime Sánchez, Jr. (right, Ph.D. candidate, Princeton University) presents research during the *History of American Democracy* Graduate Student Workshop in June 2018.

my methodology and framework to people familiar with and distanced from my own area allowed me to better understand my own arguments and intervention.”

Sánchez's comments echo those of Laura Phillips Sawyer (*Assistant Professor of Business Administration, Harvard Business School*), a former graduate student fellow who has since contributed to Tobin's inquiry on the *History of American Democracy*. She has said that her engagement with Tobin as a professor “provided an experience very similar to the most intense and productive graduate seminars I attended in graduate school. ... The participants' depth of knowledge and breadth of interests pushed each presenter to clarify historical claims and to broaden applications of research findings. ... [T]he experience ultimately pushed everyone to reach beyond comfortable historiographical interventions and toward bolder contributions to ongoing concerns in the political discourse.”

Connecting our workshops to our ongoing research questions has helped advance the goal that Tobin set for our graduate student programming ten years ago: to provide a forum for doctoral candidates and other graduate students to engage in interdisciplinary discussions around pressing issues—discussions that could encourage and prepare students to pursue ambitious and important research agendas for years to come.



↑ Kim Lucas (center, Ph.D. candidate, Brandeis University; Civic Research Director, Mayor of Boston's Office of New Urban Mechanics) engages with a presentation at a 2016 graduate student workshop.

Mission Statement

The Tobin Project is a catalyst for transformative research in the social sciences. The mission of the Tobin Project is to mobilize, motivate, and support a community of scholars across the social sciences and allied fields seeking to deepen our understanding of significant challenges facing the nation over the long term. Toward this end, the Tobin Project aims to identify and pursue questions that, if addressed with rigorous scholarly research, could have the greatest potential to benefit society and to unlock doors within the academy to new and vital lines of inquiry.

Opportunities at Tobin

The Tobin Project is looking for talented and motivated individuals to join our team as Research Analysts and Case Writers. Research Analysts work on a range of projects related to our four core initiatives to generate rigorous social science research aimed at solving important problems facing society. Case Writers will work with leading scholars and Tobin Project staff to translate academic research into pedagogical case studies and to promote case-based pedagogy as a powerful tool for disseminating scholarship and educating students.

Tobin is accepting applications from top-performing professionals, recent graduates, graduate students, and undergraduates. We are looking for individuals who possess excellent research and writing skills as well as project management experience. Interested candidates can learn more about the positions and application process on the Opportunities page of our website. If you have any questions, please contact opportunities@tobinproject.org.

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