

Zachary C. Courser, Ph.D.

Co-Director, Policy Lab
Associate Professor of the Practice
Claremont McKenna College
500 East Ninth St.
Claremont, CA 91711

zcourser@cmc.edu
(909) 607-6724 office
(617) 901-8787 cell

PROFESSIONAL PROFILE

Professor of the Practice of Government and Policy with over twenty years' experience in American politics, governance, and public policy. Expertise in integrating data science and AI into research and teaching. Academic researcher of Congress, institutional reform, with an upcoming book on congressional earmarking with Oxford University Press. Founder and Co-Director of the Policy Lab, a model for experiential undergraduate policy research linking students, scholars, and policymakers. Fellow of the Bipartisan Policy Center with a record of high-impact policy reports and advisory roles in Washington, DC. Extensive experience teaching and policy work abroad in France and the UK.

ACADEMIC & POLICY APPOINTMENTS

- Fellow, Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC), Washington, DC (2022–present): Research and public engagement on Congress, budgeting, and institutional reform with a special focus on earmarking.
- Co-Director, Policy Lab, Claremont McKenna College (2016–present): Design and lead an experiential learning initiative connecting students with policy partners (Brookings Institution, BPC, American Enterprise Institute, RAND, Los Angeles Superior Court, Los Angeles Mayor's Office). Directed 12 policy research projects on Congress, voting access, access to justice, health care, refugee policy, and city governance. Secured multi-year funding from the Hewlett Foundation (2019–2025) to support the Policy Lab program.
- Research Director, Dreier Roundtable, Claremont McKenna College (2014–9): Organized international and domestic conferences on populism, polarization, trade, and democratic governance. With support from the Hewlett Foundation, organized a conference at James Madison's home Montpelier, and edited and contributed to a collection of academic essays for Kansas University Press based on the proceedings on how political polarization was affecting the US Constitution.
- Enseigner, Sciences Po Lyon (Institut d'Études Politiques de Lyon), France (2013–4): Taught courses on American conservatism and the U.S. Congress; participated in roundtables on American elections.
- Executive Director, Commission on Wellbeing Policy, Legatum Institute, London, UK (2012–3): Directed a high-level international policy project with Nobel laureate Sir Angus Deaton and Lord Gus O'Donnell, former Head of the British Civil Service. Oversaw research and policy development on wellbeing metrics and their use in government decision-making.
- Senior Programme Director and Fellow, Legatum Institute, London, UK (2012–3): Organized major international events, including the *Symposium on Ethics for a More Prosperous World* with H.H. the Dalai Lama (London, October 2012). Worked with the David Halpern of Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) based in the Cabinet Office on developing domestic UK policy initiatives.
- Interim Director, Washington Program, Claremont McKenna College (2010–1): Supervised CMC's academic program in Washington, taught courses on Congress and US elections, and organized course seminars with Associate Justice of the Supreme Court Antonin Scalia on campaign finance law; David Wasserman of the Cook Political Report on House elections; and former Reps. Martin Frost (D-TX) and Tom Davis (R-VA) on political parties.

PUBLICATIONS & RESEARCH

Books

Empowering the Purse: How Earmarks Help Congress Do its Job. Oxford University Press, under contract. Manuscript under review. Expected publication January 2027.

Parchment Barriers: Political Polarization and the Limits of Constitutional Order (University of Kansas Press, 2018), co-editor and contributor, “Introduction” and “Parties Against the Constitution.”

Policy Reports

“Power Restored: Congressionally Directed Spending in the 117th Congress and Recommendations for Improvement,” with Michael Thorning, Franz Wuerfmannsdobler, Bipartisan Policy Center, Washington, DC (February 2023).

“Understanding Access and Turnout in the 2020 Election,” Policy Lab Research Brief (June 2022).

“Restoring the Power of the Purse: Earmarks and Re-empowering legislators to deliver local benefits,” with Kevin Kosar, American Enterprise Institute, Washington, DC (February 2021).

“Wal-Mart and the Politics of American Retail,” Competitive Enterprise Institute (November 2005).

Applied Policy Research (Work Product)

Twelve client-commissioned research projects conducted through the Policy Lab course—team taught with CMC economics Professor Eric Helland—covering policy areas such as voting access, Medicaid and Medicare, refugee policies in cities, access to justice in the civil docket, and congressional earmarking. While not all were publicly distributed, reports and memoranda associated with each project were designed to professional standards and directly informed the strategic decision-making of partner organizations.

- “Pilot Programs in Congress,” CMC Policy Lab, Bipartisan Policy Center, Fall/Spring 2025/6.
- “Policy Proposals for Closing the Access to Justice Gap in State Laws” CMC Policy Lab, Los Angeles County Superior Court, Spring 2025.
- “Access to Justice Policy Reforms in Civil Litigation: Domestic Violence Restraining Orders and Debt Collection,” CMC Policy Lab, Rand Corporation, Fall 2024.
- “Evaluating Reforms to Debt Collection Practices in Court Administration and State Law,” CMC Policy Lab, Rand Corporation, Spring 2023 – Spring 2024.
- “Evaluating FY23 Congressionally Directed Spending,” CMC Policy Lab, Bipartisan Policy Center, Fall 2022.
- “Examining the Effects of Changing Vote Access on Turnout in the 2020 Election,” CMC Policy Lab, American Enterprise Institute, Washington, DC, Fall 2021 and Spring 2022.
- “A Federal Policy on Disrupted Elections,” CMC Policy Lab, American Enterprise Institute, Washington, DC, Fall 2020 and Spring 2021.
- “Reinstituting Congressional Earmarking,” CMC Policy Lab, American Enterprise Institute, Washington, DC, Fall 2019 and Spring 2020.
- “50-State Medicaid Scorecard of Primary Care Coverage,” CMC Policy Lab, Bipartisan Policy Institute, Spring and Fall 2019.

- “Review of Global City Migration and Refugee Initiatives,” CMC Policy Lab, Office of Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti, Fall 2018.
- “The Role of Global Cities in the UN Global Compact on Refugees,” CMC Policy Lab, Brookings Institution, Spring 2018.
- “Improving Care for High-Need, High-Cost Medicare Patients,” CMC Policy Lab, Bipartisan Policy Center, Fall 2017.

Scholarly Publications

“Losing Faith in Elites: The Roots of Protest in the Occupy and the Tea Party movements,” in *Get in the Booth*, Larry Sabato, ed. (New York: Pearson / Longman, 2012).

“Protest Without a Party: The Tea Party as a Conservative Social Movement,” *Society*: vol. 49, iss. 1, p. 43-53 (New York: Springer, 2012).

“The Tea Party at the Election,” *The Forum*: vol. 8, iss. 4 (Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Electronic Press, January 2011).

“Political Parties,” “Ballot Initiatives,” “Term Limits,” “Independent Expenditure,” “Precinct Committee Person,” and “Soft Money” in *The Encyclopedia of American Parties and Elections*, Larry Sabato and Howard Ernst, eds. (New York: Facts on File, 2006).

“Christopher F. Zurn: Splitsville USA: A Democratic Argument for Breaking Up the United States” (book review), *Review of Politics* 86, no. 4 (Fall 2024).

Working Papers

“Making Spending Representative: Text Analysis of How US House Members Use Distributive Spending to Represent their Constituents.”

“Giveth and Taketh Away: The Effect of Post-Pandemic Vote Access Retrenchment on Turnout.”

“The Impact of Statewide Vote-by-Mail on Partisan and Minority Participation in Elections,” working paper (with Eric Helland). https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4697323

Conference Papers Presented

“Assessing Turnout Effects of Statewide Vote-By-Mail Through Measuring the Treatment on the Treated,” Election Science, Research, and Administration (ESRA) Conference, University of Southern California, May 16-17, 2024.

“The Impact of Statewide Vote-by-Mail on Partisan and Minority Participation in Elections,” Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management fall conference, Washington, DC, November 18, 2022.

“Parties Against the Constitution,” Political Polarization and the Administrative State, C. Boyden Gray Center for the Study of the Administrative State,” George Mason University Law School, March 29, 2019.

“Nature and Origins of Populism in the US and France: Fears and Hopes for Liberal Democracy,” Democratic Discontent: How Populism and Nationalism are Reshaping Politics in Europe and America, Dreier Roundtable, Claremont McKenna College, January 4 - 7. 2018.

“Political Parties Against the Constitution,” Montpelier Conference: Examining the Roots of Polarization in Our Constitutional Order, Orange, Virginia, April 2, 2016.

“America’s Political Religion: The Role of the Constitution in Conservative Campaign Politics” L’Association Française d’Etudes Américaines annual conference, La Rochelle, France, May 30, 2015.

“The Tea ‘Party’ as a Conservative Social Movement,” Workshop on the Future of Social Conservatism, Henry Salvatori Center, Claremont McKenna College, Claremont, CA, May 20 - 21, 2011.

“Mugwumps and Goo-Goos: American Democracy and 19th Century Anti-Partisanship,” Midwestern Political Science Association annual conference, Chicago, IL, 2007.

“Do Parties Make for a Better Democracy? A Comparative Analysis of Party Organization in the States,” Midwestern Political Science Association annual conference, Chicago, IL, 2005.

“Partisanship and Participation: A Theory of Political Parties in a Democracy,” Midwestern Political Science Association annual conference, Chicago, IL, 2004.

“Soft in the Center: Party Politics in the Era of the Independent Voter,” Western Political Science Association annual conference, Portland, OR, 2004.

Invited Talks & Presentations

“Populism and the Challenge to Liberal Democracy in the Atlantic Alliance,” Henry Salvatori Center, Claremont McKenna College, St-Paul de Vence, France, June 24-27, 2024.

“The Anglo Roots of American Liberty,” Henry Salvatori Center, Claremont McKenna College, London, UK, May 20-25, 2024.

“Analyzing fiscal year 2023 directed spending,” at “Power of the Purse: Restoring Congress's Directed Spending Authority,” Bipartisan Policy Center, Washington, DC, December 12, 2022.

“Race and Election Law,” moderator, Marian Miner Cook Athenaeum, Claremont McKenna College, November 1, 2022.

“Evaluating the 2022 Midterm Election,” Claremont McKenna College Alumni Association, October 21, 2022.

“The Evolution of Earmarking in the US Congress,” Agora Institute, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD, September 13, 2022.

“Reforming Congress,” Sunwater Institute, Bethesda, MD, June 21, 2022.

“Access & Voting in the 2020 General Election,” Claremont McKenna College 75th Anniversary Alumni Weekend, May 27, 2022.

“Analyzing fiscal year 2022 earmarking,” at “Reforming and restructuring earmarks: What is the path forward?” CMC Policy Lab, American Enterprise Institute, Bipartisan Policy Center, Washington, DC, December 13, 2021

“Does Congress Still Control the Power of the Purse?” Center for Social, Cultural, and Constitutional Studies, American Enterprise Institute, March 25, 2021

“The Future Modernization of Congress,” Center for Social, Cultural, and Constitutional Studies, American Enterprise Institute, January 29, 2021.

“Preview: Election Night 2020,” Marian Miner Cook Athenaeum, Claremont McKenna College, November 2, 2020.

“Congress and Constitutional Reform,” Center for Social, Cultural, and Constitutional Studies, American Enterprise Institute, October 16, 2020.

“Elections and the Constitution,” Claremont Discourse: Constitution Day 2020, Claremont Colleges Library, September 16, 2020.

“Veepstakes! How Candidates Choose their Running Mates,” Claremont McKenna College Alumni Association, August 13, 2020.

“Democracy in a Time of Crisis: Understanding how COVID will Impact the 2020 Election,” Claremont McKenna College Alumni Association, May 7, 2020.

“Understanding the 2020 Democratic Primary,” Claremont McKenna College Alumni Association San Diego Chapter, January 9, 2020.

“Polarization and the Madisonian System,” at “Political Polarization and the Administrative State: Government Institutions in Turbulent Political Times,” Claremont McKenna College & George Mason University Center for the Study of the Administrative State, Washington, DC, March 29, 2019.

“Political Polarization’s Challenge to the Constitution,” Marian Miner Cook Athenaeum, Claremont McKenna College, November 13, 2018.

“The Post-Election Politics of Identity,” invited presentation for Gender and Sexuality Studies, Marian Miner Cook Athenaeum, Claremont McKenna College, October 23, 2017.

“Sufficient Virtue for Self-Government: The Constitution and the Limits of Democracy,” Center for Liberal Arts and Free Institutions, University of California, Los Angeles, October 12, 2017.

“Election Night 2016: Analyzing the Results,” moderator of panel discussion of the elections returns, Marian Miner Cook Athenaeum, Claremont McKenna College, November 8, 2016.

“2016 and the Politics of Discontent,” moderated discussion on how populism is reshaping democratic politics in the US and Europe, Marian Miner Cook Athenaeum, Claremont McKenna College, October 28, 2016.

“The Race for the White House 2016: Third Presidential Debate,” moderator of a faculty/student panel analyzing the third presidential debate, Marian Miner Cook Athenaeum, Claremont McKenna College, October 20, 2016.

“Religion, Race and Politics,” panelist for discussion on 2016 election’s impact on race and religion in the United States. Chicano Latino Student Affairs and the Office of Black Student Affairs, Claremont, CA, October 19, 2016.

“The Trump Phenomenon,” panelist for discussion of the origins of the Trump candidacy, Marian Miner Cook Athenaeum, Claremont McKenna College, October 12, 2016.

“Populism, Protest, and the Unpopularity of Politics,” presentation on the 2016 election. Claremont McKenna College Alumni Association, Sacramento Chapter, October 13, 2016.

“The Trump Phenomenon” panelist for discussion of the nomination of Donald Trump. Marian Miner Cook Athenaeum, Claremont McKenna College, October 12, 2016.

“The Oval Office and The Fourth Estate: A Conversation on Politics and Journalism in the Nation’s Capital,” moderator of discussion between White House deputy press secretary Brandi Hoffine and New York Times White House correspondent Michael Shear, Marian Miner Cook Athenaeum, Claremont McKenna College, October 10, 2016.

“How Populism is Reshaping Campaign 2016 and the Future of American Politics,” presentation for Claremont McKenna Trustee Meeting, September 30, 2016.

“The Race for the White House 2016: First Presidential Debate,” moderator and organizer of a student focus group analyzing the first presidential debate, Marian Miner Cook Athenaeum, Claremont McKenna College, September 26, 2016.

“The Parties vs. the People? The Strange Case of Election 2016,” presentation to Orange County Chapter, Claremont McKenna Alumni Association, April 7, 2016.

“After Scalia: The Politics of Supreme Court Nominations in an Age of Polarization,” moderator of faculty discussion of the impact of the death of Justice Antonin Scalia on the judicial selection process, March 3, 2016.

“Trump, Populism, and Discontent,” panel presentation for the colloquium “Les Primaires aux Etats-Unis: En un combat (politique) douteux,” Sciences Po Lyon, Lyon, France, February 4, 2016.

“Decision '16: Decoding the Iowa Caucus & New Hampshire Primary,” panel presentation, Marian Miner Cook Athenaeum, Claremont McKenna College, February 9, 2016.

“Presaging the Presidential Election” presentation on the 2015 off-year election, and its effects on the 2016 presidential election. Marian Miner Cook Athenaeum, Claremont McKenna College, November 3, 2015.

“Midterm Elections in the Crossfire,” presentation and panel discussion on the 2014 midterm election, Marian Miner Cook Athenaeum, Claremont McKenna College, November 4, 2014.

“The Use Of Subjective Wellbeing As A Tool For Public Policy,” Subjective Wellbeing: its measurement and use in public policy and decision-making in Mexico and Latin American; Latin American Social Science Institute (FLACSO) Mexico; Mexico City, Mexico, April 17 – 18, 2013.

Roundtable on the 2012 Republican Presidential Nomination, Science Po Lyon (Institut d’Etudes Politiques de Lyon); Lyon, France, December 8, 2011.

“Democracy and The Politics of Prosperity: The Tea Party's Revolt against Inequality of Opportunity,” Legatum Institute; London, UK, October 14, 2011.

“Parties, What Are They Good For?” Bridging the Partisan Divide: Rediscovering Deliberation, Arsalyn Foundation annual conference; Washington, DC, July 26, 2008.

“Last Lap to the White House, 2008” George Marshall Foundation, Lexington, VA, October 29, 2008.

Conference Organization

“Divisions in the Western Liberal Consensus,” CMC Policy Lab & Henry Salvatori Center, St-Paul de Vence, France, June 26–9, 2023.

“Power of the Purse: Restoring Congress's Directed Spending Authority,” Bipartisan Policy Center, Washington, DC, December 12, 2022.

“Reforming and restructuring earmarks: What is the path forward?” CMC Policy Lab, American Enterprise Institute, Bipartisan Policy Center, Washington, DC, December 13, 2021

“Democratic Discontent: How Populism and Nationalism are Reshaping Politics in Europe and America,” Dreier Roundtable, Claremont McKenna College, January 4–7, 2018.

“NAFTA Endangered: Mexico-U.S. Prosperity in the Trump Era,” Dreier Roundtable, November 7, 2017. Organizer and panel moderator.

“Law & Legitimacy,” Fifth Annual Southern California Law and Social Science (SoCLASS), Claremont McKenna College, Friday, April 28, 2017. Co-organizer, panel chair.

“Democratic Discontent: How Populism and Nationalism are Reshaping Politics in Europe and America,” Dreier Roundtable, Saint Paul de Vence, France, June 12–15, 2017.

“Unpopular Government: How Populism is Reshaping Politics & Trade,” Dreier Roundtable, Claremont McKenna College, Claremont, CA, October 28, 2016.

“Montpelier Conference: Examining the Roots of Polarization in Our Constitutional Order,” James Madison’s Montpelier, Orange, Virginia, April 1–3, 2016.

“Examining the Roots of Polarization in our Constitutional Order,” Dreier Roundtable, Claremont McKenna College, Claremont, CA, October 9–11, 2015.

“Bridging the Immigration Divide: Forging a Bi-Partisan Policy on Visas for STEM Graduates,” Dreier Roundtable & Brookings Institute, Washington, DC, March 26, 2015.

“Immigration Policy for the 21st Century,” Dreier Roundtable & Brookings Institution, Claremont, CA, November 7, 2014.

“Weimar Exiles in Los Angeles: Innovation, Entrepreneurship, and Opportunity in a New Cultural Frontier,” Legatum Institute & University of Southern California Sidney Harman Academy for Polymathic Studies, Los Angeles, CA, August 28–30, 2013.

“Symposium on Ethics for a More Prosperous World,” with H.H. the Dalai Lama, Legatum Institute, London, UK, October 23, 2012.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Courses Taught

Institutions & Political Development

- American Conservatism (Sciences Po Lyon, 2014)
- U.S. Congress (Sciences Po Lyon, 2013; Boston College, 2010)
- American Legal History (Johns Hopkins University, Center for Talented Youth, 2004–5)

Political Behavior & Representation

- American Political Parties & Interest Groups (Claremont McKenna College, Boston College, Washington & Lee, University of Virginia, 2003–11)
- Campaigns and Elections (Claremont McKenna College, Boston College, Washington & Lee, University of Virginia, 2005–10)
- Introduction to American Politics (Claremont McKenna College, Washington & Lee, 2006–17)

Public Policy & Experiential Learning

- Policy Lab: Public Policy Analysis (Claremont McKenna College, 2016–25)

Undergraduate Summer Research Fellows Program

Each summer since 2020, I have directed an 8-week fellowship program supervising a team of undergraduates working part-time on my academic and policy research. Fellows receive structured training in data science, policy analysis, and applied political research, and contribute to ongoing projects in congressional reform, election law, earmarks, and access to justice:

- 2020: Creating survey instruments and interviewing former Members of Congress regarding their career experience with earmarking.
- 2021: Evaluating state election emergency laws and disrupted elections during COVID.
- 2022: Evaluating county-level turnout and access to voting in the 2020 federal elections.
- 2023: Classifying earmarking journalism with dictionary methods.
- 2024: Content analysis of earmarking journalism using LLMs.
- 2025: Using High Performance Computing to assess changes to state-level voting access laws using voter administrative data.

Post Doctoral Teaching & Research Fellowships

- **Jack Miller Center Post-Doctoral Fellow, Visiting Assistant Professor**, Department of Government, Boston College (2009–10).
- **Visiting Assistant Professor**, Department of Politics, Washington & Lee University (2008–9).
- **Visiting Instructor**, Claremont McKenna College (2006–8).

EDUCATION & SKILLS

Academic Degrees

- University of Virginia, Ph.D. in Government, May 2008 (M.A. 2003).
- Claremont McKenna College, B.A. in Government, 1999.

Computational Methods and Data Science Experience

- Large Language Models (LLMs): Apply text-as-data methods using LLMs to extract, classify, and analyze data, and other innovative uses of AI in policy and political science research.
- High Performance Computing (HPC): Completed training at USC's Center for Advanced Research Computing to integrate HPC through parallel R processing, scaling up analyses of terabytes of administrative voter data.
- Teaching & Training: Integrated HPC and LLM methods into undergraduate research training through the Policy Lab, providing hands-on experience with computational tools in governance and policy.

Language Certifications

- French B1 level (CEFR), Test de connaissance du français (TCF), October 2024.
- Université Lumière Lyon 2, Centre International d'Études Françaises, Lyon, France. Diplôme universitaire d'études française, A2 level in Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), March 2012.

LEADERSHIP, SERVICE & CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Major Grants

- Hewlett Foundation, Policy Lab (\$750,000), 2019-25.
- Hewlett Foundation, Montpellier Project (\$250,000), 2015-18.

Professional Service & Media Commentary

- Affiliated Faculty, Henry Salvatori Center, Claremont McKenna College, 2023-.
- Washington Semester Program faculty advisor, Claremont McKenna College, 2014-.
- Institutional Representative, Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management, 2022-24.
- Politics Contributor, NPR Affiliate KPCC, Pasadena, CA, 2017-2.
- Manuscript reviewer, *Politique Américaine*, 2016-18.
- Manuscript reviewer, *Political Science Quarterly*, 2009-16.

Civic & Community Leadership

- Founding President, board member, Housing Claremont, 2019-21.
- Board member, Pilgrim Place, 2019-23.
- Board member, Claremont Heritage, 2017-20.
- Chair, Traffic & Transportation Commission, City of Claremont, 2018-19; Commissioner 2015-19.