

# SERENA LAWS

---

Nelson A. Rockefeller Center for Public Policy and the Social Sciences  
Dartmouth College  
6082 Rockefeller Hall  
Hanover, NH 03755  
PHONE: (612) 910-2294 | FAX: (603) 646-1329  
EMAIL: serena.laws@dartmouth.edu

## CURRENT POSITION

---

Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Rockefeller Center for Public Policy, Dartmouth College

- Manages the *Policy Research Shop*, supervising undergraduates doing non-partisan policy research for New Hampshire and Vermont legislators.

## EDUCATION

---

Ph.D. Candidate, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, Political Science (Defense Scheduled December 10, 2010)

- *Dissertation Title*: “What is Owed: Debt, Bankruptcy, and American Citizenship”
- *Committee*: Scott Abernathy (advisor), Joe Soss, Dara Strolovitch, Tracey Deutsch
- *Abstract*: Consumer bankruptcy filings have skyrocketed during the same period that social spending in traditional welfare state programs in the United States has declined. Far from coincidental, I suggest these trends indicate a general shift of social risks into the realm of personal debt and bankruptcy. In my dissertation I consider how well bankruptcy functions as a substitute welfare state program and, more broadly, what this shift of social risks into the realm of personal debt and bankruptcy means for American citizenship. I first explore the ambivalent and paradoxical relationship between American citizenship and personal debt, which was historically punished but today is implicitly required to be a good American citizen. The rest of the dissertation examines the institution of bankruptcy through my original nation-wide survey of bankruptcy trustees, as well as analyses of national survey data and state-level bankruptcy filing rate patterns. My findings suggest that bankruptcy is limited in its ability to function as a social insurance program because it advances a highly individualized and stigmatized solution to financial distress, a pattern strengthened by recent bankruptcy reforms which have made bankruptcy more punitive and harder to access. I conclude that the reliance on personal debt and bankruptcy to cover social risks is damaging to American citizenship because it individualizes and depoliticizes what, in a robust welfare state, could be seen as a broader social project of risk protection.

M.A., University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, Political Science, 2006

B.A., Amherst College, Amherst, MA, *Magna Cum Laude*, 2001

## RESEARCH INTERESTS

---

American Social Policy, Welfare States, Bankruptcy, Politics of Public Policy, Legal Aid, Women and Politics, Social Rights, Inequality and American Democracy, Neoliberalism.

## REPORTS, CONFERENCE PAPERS, AND CURRENT PROJECTS

---

### REPORTS:

- 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.

### CONFERENCE PAPERS:

- “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.
- “Producing Poverty: Medical Debt Policies at the State and National Levels.” Accepted to the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association Conference, Chicago, IL, April 2007.

## TEACHING EXPERIENCE

---

*Visiting Assistant Professor*, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH (Spring 2010)

- Consumer Debt, Bankruptcy and Economic Policy

*Visiting Instructor*, Political Science Dept., St. Olaf College, Northfield, MN (Spring 2007-08)

*Visiting Instructor*, Political Science Department, Macalester College, St. Paul, MN (Fall 2007)

*Teaching Assistant*, Political Science, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities (2003-2007)

- Introduction to American Government: American Democracy in a Changing World
- Congressional Politics and Institutions, Prof. Kathryn Pearson
- Supreme Court and Constitutional Interpretation, Prof. Tim Johnson
- Democracy and Citizenship

## RESEARCH AND PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

---

*Research Assistant* for Professor John Sullivan 2007 – 2008

Dept. of Political Science, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities

Researched, prepared materials for a graduate political science course on citizens' juries.  
Organized speakers and participants for citizens' jury.

*Research Assistant* for Professor Dara Strolovitch 2006 – 2007

Dept. of Political Science, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities

Researched and wrote a literature review about increasing global orientation of U.S.  
interest groups. Updated an extensive database of interest groups.

*Conference Organizer*, Inequality and American Democracy Conference 2005 – 2006

Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities

Primary fundraiser and organizer for a political science graduate student conference  
which considered the implications of rising economic inequality for American democracy  
and for the study of political science.

*Complaint Counselor*, American Civil Liberties Union of Washington 2002 – 2003  
Seattle, WA

Responded to calls on ACLU-WA Complaint Line; summarized written complaints;  
researched projects for Legal Program Associate; created web version of the complaint  
counseling manual.

## FELLOWSHIPS AND AWARDS

---

### External Fellowships:

- Horowitz Foundation for Social Policy Grant, 2007
- Amherst College Graduate Fellowship, 2003-2006
- National Merit Scholarship, 1997

### University of Minnesota, Twin Cities:

- Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship for 2008-2009 Academic Year
- Thesis Research Grant, 2008
- Graduate Research Partnership Program Grant, with Professor Elizabeth Beaumont, 2007
- Political Science Summer Fellowship, 2007
- Ueland Fellowship, 2006
- Vernie Wolfsberg Foundation Fellowship, 2004, 2005

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

---

- *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)

## COMMITTEE WORK AND INSTITUTIONAL SERVICE

---

### *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 political science graduate students.

## PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

---

- American Political Science Association
- Midwest Political Science Association

## REFERENCES

---

SCOTT ABERNATHY (Advisor)  
Associate Professor  
Department of Political Science  
University of Minnesota  
PHONE: 612-624-3308  
EMAIL: [abernath@umn.edu](mailto:abernath@umn.edu)

DARA STROLOVITCH  
Associate Professor  
Department of Political Science  
University of Minnesota  
PHONE: (612) 626-0213  
EMAIL: [dzs@umn.edu](mailto:dzs@umn.edu)

JOE SOSS  
Professor and Cowles Chair for the Study of  
Public Service  
Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs  
University of Minnesota  
PHONE: 612-626-9865  
EMAIL: [jboss@umn.edu](mailto:jboss@umn.edu)