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## **2026 Leonard v. B. Sutton Colloquium**

# **GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES ON EQUAL PARTICIPATION AS A DEMOCRATIC VALUE**

### ***ABSTRACTS***



**FRIDAY, APRIL 10, 2026  
9:00 AM - 5:00 PM**

Ricketson Law Building  
Room 165

# ABSTRACTS

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## **VAHID ABEDINI**

*Farzaneh Family Assistant Professor of Iranian Studies, David L. Boren College of International Studies, University of Oklahoma*

### **Unfashionable Participation: Marginalized Political Agency in the Global South**

Much of the literature on political development over the past several decades has assumed that meaningful political participation must ultimately converge toward the institutional model of liberal democracy. This assumption has shaped both scholarly debates and political reform movements across many countries in the Global South. In Iran, for instance, reformist political thought in the post-Cold War era drew heavily on liberal-democratic models of political development, envisioning expanded political participation primarily through the institutionalization of modern political parties and formal democratic competition.

This paper argues that such frameworks have often obscured other forms of political participation that emerge in political systems where formal party institutions are weak or absent. Drawing on the concept of electoral activism, the paper examines how elections can function as arenas for political mobilization, coalition-building, and the articulation of social demands even without fully institutionalized party structures.

Focusing on contemporary Iranian electoral politics, the paper shows how marginalized and underrepresented groups—including ethnic minorities and lower socioeconomic constituencies—have used electoral moments to express political demands, negotiate representation, and influence political discourse. While such forms of participation are frequently overlooked because they do not conform to dominant liberal-democratic expectations, they nonetheless constitute meaningful political engagement within existing institutional constraints.

By highlighting these dynamics, the paper calls for a broader conceptualization of equal participation—one that recognizes diverse forms of political agency and better reflects the political realities of many societies in the Global South.

## **RACHEL A. EPSTEIN**

*Professor and Director, The Sié Chéou-Kang Center for International Security and Diplomacy, Josef Korbel School of Global and Public Affairs, University of Denver*

### **Equal Participation in International Politics through Democratic Sovereignty: East European Cases and Paradoxes**

East Central Europe, the countries sandwiched between Germany and Russia, has long struggled to achieve foreign policy autonomy and democratic consolidation. I use the term “democratic sovereignty” to refer to two linked concepts: the 1) freedom to choose with whom to ally in the international system through 2) democratic procedures in which publics are the ultimate sources of authority. The end of the Cold War and the open-door policies of both the European Union and the

North Atlantic Treaty Organization that allowed postcommunist countries to join their ranks advanced democratic sovereignty in surprising ways. For populations in the region, membership in the EU and NATO appeared to offer an end to the vulnerability and bloodshed so frequently visited upon them by external powers.

As anticipated, the EU and NATO provided East Central Europe equal participation in their organizations, which represented a democracy-enhancing shift in international politics. But the concept of “democratic sovereignty” nevertheless suffers from two core problems 35 years after the Cold War’s end. First is Russia’s war against Ukraine that is a gross violation of democratic sovereignty. Second are the anti-democratic movements within East Central European countries themselves that do not provide equal protection under the law or full democratic enfranchisement for their citizens. Paradoxically, democratic and rule of law procedures within the EU and NATO have to a certain extent limited these organizations’ willingness or ability to support democracy within their members.

### **DMITRII KUZNETSOV**

*Visiting Fulbright Scholar, Ved Nanda Center for International & Comparative Law, Sturm College of Law, PhD candidate, University of Gothenburg, Sweden*

#### **(Un)Equal Participation: Governmental Strategies of Dividing and Demolishing Civil Society in Russia**

Official discourse of the Russian Government employs notions such as ‘sovereign democracy’, ‘traditional values’, and ‘interest of minors’ to justify increasingly stringent repression of civil society institutions. These terms have been incorporated into legislation, featured in judgments and decisions of high courts, and cited in officials’ speeches. However, these concepts are primarily rhetorical devices—important, yet masking more concrete, severe and dangerous legislative, administrative, and judicial tactics aimed at establishing total societal control. Effectively, they serve to undermine civil society’s role to merely perform non-political functions within social services.

This analysis will trace the development and implementation of such measures, beginning with support for certain NGOs through presidential grants and the exclusion of others from competitions, progressing to the labelling of independent NGOs as ‘foreign agents,’ ‘undesirable’ or ‘extremist’ organisations, with members subjected to criminal persecution. The timeframe spans from 2011 to 2025, starting with mass protests against sham parliamentary elections and the unprecedented legislative responses by the Government, through to the aggression against Ukraine, when the process of civil society demolition reached its culmination. This paper demonstrates how, using legal tools, a relatively free civil society can be dismantled rapidly when authoritarian tendencies lack sufficient checks and balances, and when society is manipulated and divided.

## **LELIA MOONEY**

*Adjunct Lecturer, Georgetown University School of Continuing Studies (SCS) and the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service (SFS) Center for Latin American Studies (CLAS)*

### **AI, Rights, and the Vita Activa: Rethinking Reskilling for Equal Participation**

This presentation argues that in an age of automation, equal participation in democracy requires more than formal rights and narrow technical skills; it calls for meaningful access to AI capabilities, leadership development, and governance literacy. While automation and digital technologies are often praised for their potential to expand global prosperity, they can also accelerate disruption, deepen social unrest, and erode people's sense of purpose, making it essential to center meaning, discernment, purpose, and action in how AI is designed, governed, and deployed across sectors and institutions. Existing AI training ecosystems frequently reproduce inequality by separating technical upskilling from agency, critical reflection, and voice in decision-making. The talk will examine how emerging AI governance approaches attempt to integrate human rights, governance, and compliance standards, and what this integration implies for turning equal participation into a lived practice rather than an abstract commitment. Grounded in international human rights norms on non-discrimination and on economic, social, and cultural rights, the presentation contends that AI reskilling requires a new educational paradigm—one that couples rights-based governance with a holistic approach to learning, equipping present and future generations to participate actively in the vita activa with clarity, purpose, and discernment.

## **SHITONG QIAO**

*Ken Young-Gak Yun and Jinah Park Yun Distinguished Professor of Law, Duke University School of Law*

### **Rule of Law and Democracy: Evidence from a Survey Experiment in China**

Based on an in-person survey experiment in China (n = 3,341) conducted in the context of homeowner associations (HOAs), this project finds that the role of local courts is determinative when conflicts arise between national law and communal autonomy, highlighting the importance of the rule of law (as contrasted with mere legality) for neighborhood democracy.

## **DAVID VITALE**

*Associate Professor, Co-Director of Centre for Constitutions in Context, University of Warwick School of Law*

### **The Democracy-Participation-Trust Relationship and its Implications for Constitutional Rights Adjudication**

This paper will explore the complex triangular relationship among three concepts pivotal to constitutional democracy – democracy, participation, and trust – and the relationship's implications for the judicial enforcement of constitutional rights.

Democracy depends on participation. Trust may encourage participation and can further democracy. And participation can promote trust. What does this triangular relationship mean for courts when adjudicating constitutional rights, especially when constitutional review by the judiciary has been justified based on the idea that it can support democracy? Using the enforcement of social rights as an illustration, the paper will argue that breaking down this triangular relationship offers valuable insights into what constitutional rights require of governments, specifically in engaging with rights-holders.

## **MARCO WAN**

*Professor and Director of the Programme in Law and Literary Studies, Faculty of Law, University of Hong Kong*

### **One Country, Two Conceptions of Justice? A Cross-cultural Approach to Hong Kong's Constitutional Politics**

This paper revisits the pro-democracy protests between 2014 and 2019 in Hong Kong – at the core of which was the demand for equal participation in the political process – and reconsiders them from the perspective of the philosophy of law and the study of law and humanities. The protests in the city, and the authorities' reaction to them, have often been framed as a clash between democratic and authoritarian outlooks and systems. I reframe the events as a clash between two fundamentally different conceptions of justice, arising from the different cultural traditions of China and the liberal West, and explore the implications of that reframing.

## **ANNECOOS WIERSEMA**

*Associate Dean of Graduate and International Legal Programs, Catherine Boggs Endowed Faculty Research Scholar, Professor of Law, Sturm College of Law*

### **The Role of Democracy and Participation in Protecting a Healthy Environment**

Democracy and governance – including participation, transparency, protest, equal protection, and access to legal remedies – have all become key aspects of citizens' efforts to ensure protection of a healthy environment for both humans and ecosystems. Indeed, sound governance and requirements for engagement and transparency are as significant or sometimes more significant than the underlying substantive rules in place to protect a healthy environment in achieving environmental protection. This presentation will explore key legal and non-legal developments that highlight the importance of democracy in environmental protection, how it can be reinforced, and its limitations.