



## *Early-Career Fellowships in Religion and the Public Sphere*

# **Religion, Spirituality, and Democratic Renewal**

The [Religion, Spirituality, and Democratic Renewal \(RSDR\) Fellowship](#) of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) aims to bring knowledge of the place of religion and spirituality into scholarly and public conversations about renewing democracy in the United States. These fellowships are offered by the SSRC Program on Religion and the Public Sphere with the support and partnership of the Fetzer Institute.

Applications are due **April 6, 2021, 5:00 p.m. Eastern time**. Apply online at [apply.ssrc.org](https://apply.ssrc.org).

### **OVERVIEW**

Since the country's founding, scholars and citizens alike have debated religion's place in US politics and civil society. The current moment is no exception. And while there are echoes from the past, the context within which American religion presently engages the public sphere is in many ways dramatically different than earlier historical moments. During the past half-century alone, the American religious terrain has undergone dramatic changes, including both rising religious diversity and rising religious disaffiliation. The political landscape, too, has been transformed by myriad, often countervailing forces, including an increasingly diverse citizenry, rising social, economic, and political inequality, and sharpening polarization. Shifting religious and political landscapes recently came to a head amidst a pandemic and presidential politics that surfaced deep existing tensions. In light of the fraught state of the US body politic, this is a crucial time for understanding the intersection of these religious and political transformations. This RFP will support work that seeks to discern whether, how, and under what conditions religion and/or spirituality shape American democracy, and vice versa.

Through research on the intersection of religious and/or spiritual identities, behaviors, attitudes, and organizations with social and political structures, processes, and institutions, RSDR fellows will deepen understanding of the evolving relationships among religion, spirituality, and democracy at this moment in US history. This year's RFP especially seeks projects that examine religious traditions and institutions that are influential in shaping democratic participation, debates, and institutions, as well as public policies. Given the urgency and ongoing relevance of these themes, fellows will be expected to make their findings accessible to a broad range of audiences.

### **ELIGIBILITY AND CRITERIA**

The RSDR fellowship program invites proposals for research at the intersection of religion, spirituality, and democracy in the United States. The fellowships offer research support over a period of up to 12 months to doctoral students who have advanced to candidacy and to postdoctoral researchers within five years of their PhD. Doctoral candidates will receive up to \$15,000 and postdoctoral researchers up to \$18,000 toward research-related expenses. Applications are welcome from scholars at either of these career stages from any country around the world.

We welcome proposals on religion and spirituality in its relation to democracy from across **all fields** in the social sciences, humanities, and theology. Research projects using **any** social science methodology, quantitative, qualitative, or mixed, are eligible, and we encourage applications that are grounded in novel theories and analytic frameworks. Proposals will be evaluated by a multidisciplinary selection committee on their overall quality and their potential to deepen understanding of the role that religion and spirituality play in democracy and to inform practical engagement around these issues. Applications, especially from recent PhD recipients, should demonstrate strong interest in disseminating findings to academic audiences, practitioners, and to broader interested publics.

Fellowship funds will typically be used for activities directly related to research, such as travel expenses and accommodations, research equipment and supplies, support for research assistants, and costs for access to publications or proprietary databases. In exceptional cases, and in consultation with program staff, award funds may be used to cover other expenses.

Given the uncertainty with regard to the feasibility of travel and in-person activities due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, applicants are encouraged to consider the potential of virtual research methods. If travel or in-person research is proposed, applicants should account for the potential impact of the pandemic in their plans.

## RESEARCH THEMES

*For this year's RFP we are particularly interested in projects that engage how **broadly reaching social trends** and **larger-scale** religious traditions or institutions are influential in shaping democratic participation, debates, and institutions as well as public policies. Conversely, we are also especially interested in how political processes shape these organizations and trends, as well as work that explores perspectives along a broad ideological and political spectrum.*

Key areas of inquiry may include the following:

1. Have recent shifts in American religiosity inhibited or strengthened the various forms of civic engagement associated with democratic citizenship? In what ways? How do religious institutions, discourses, and practices either contribute to or undermine civic engagement?
2. Have recent changes in the American religious landscape (e.g., along generational lines, strengthening or weakening affiliations) affected public understandings of when and how religion is a legitimate part of civic engagement? If so, how?
3. How are changing modes of civic engagement (e.g., use of digital and social media) shaping the way religion enters the public sphere? How is the mediated spread of (mis)information tied to religious values or social mobilizations, and how has this influenced or altered democratic institutions and civic engagement?
4. As socioeconomic and racial inequality, as well as new dynamics of participation and exclusion, shape American civil society, have patterns of religious affiliation, organization, and intensity been affected? In what ways? Conversely, have religious leaders and organizations responded to socioeconomic change and new patterns of associational life? How so?

5. What new constructive conceptions of democracy are emerging from within or among different religious and spiritual traditions? Relatedly, what immanent critiques of antidemocratic tendencies within different religious and spiritual traditions can be identified and articulated?

Projects that focus on one particular religious or spiritual tradition, or that compare across denominations, religions, and spiritual orientations, are equally welcome.

## **ADDITIONAL FELLOWSHIP ACTIVITIES**

The fellowship includes participation in an interdisciplinary workshop upon the completion of RSDR-funded research. These workshops will focus on fostering interdisciplinary dialogue on key research topics, writing for multiple audiences, public communication strategies, and cohort building.

Participants will be expected to contribute at least one essay to the SSRC's flagship web forum on religion and secularism, [\*The Immanent Frame\*](#).

## **TO APPLY**

Applications must be submitted through the SSRC's online application system no later than **5:00 p.m. Eastern time on April 6, 2021**. Applications will consist of a research proposal, a short application form, a curriculum vitae, and a letter of reference. **Apply now at [apply.ssrc.org](http://apply.ssrc.org).**