

# Goldman School of Public Policy launches the Democracy Policy Initiative

## A BPPJ Interview with the Leadership of the DPI

*Interview by Francesca Bitton*



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*In early 2024, the Goldman School launched the Democracy Policy Initiative (DPI), which leverages expertise from UC Berkeley faculty, community members, and academic partners to build an evidence base for policies that promote a healthy, responsive, and multi-racial democracy. To learn more about the DPI's structure and ambitions, BPPJ reached out to three*

*key leaders of the Initiative: Angela Glover Blackwell, DPI Chief Vision Officer and Professor of Practice; Jacob Grumbach, Associate Professor; and David Wilson, Dean of the Goldman School and Professor of Public Policy.*

*The following interview was conducted via email. Responses have been edited for clarity and conciseness.*

**Francesca Bitton (BPPJ):** Dean Wilson, what is the DPI, and how will it be unique relative to existing efforts in this space?

**David Wilson (DW):** The Democracy Policy Initiative provides a framework for how the Goldman School will leverage its presence at UC Berkeley and its standing as a leading school of public policy to address the challenges facing American democracy. We will advance actions that address four key gaps—knowledge, resource, innovation, and communication.

The first is a knowledge gap. Through the DPI, we will develop a new field of “democracy policy” that provides a framework for how public policy can advance and strengthen participation in the activities of government.

Given our expertise, we will work to fill the resource gap, by serving as a university partner to community organizations, governments, media, and the most engaged individuals and intellectuals to share information, tools, and knowledge.

We will leverage UC Berkeley’s outstanding scholarly assets to also identify, test, and advance ideas, policies, and programs that strengthen democratic engagement and public trust in government, thereby filling the innovation gap.

And lastly, we will bring together experts, government, media organizations and journalists, and community groups to “interrogate democracy” through communication, such as conversations, social media outlets, and publications. We will raise and answer questions about democratic governance, federalism, party systems, and public opinion.

Ultimately, the DPI will allow GSPP to make meaningful contributions to democracy by uplifting the consequences of public policy as our system’s most impactful practice.

**BPPJ:** What does it mean to establish democracy policy as a new interdisciplinary field of study?

**DW:** It means that scholars, students, and the public will have new language, new research, and new frameworks to understand how our U.S. democracy operates and the tools that the government has at its disposal to strengthen participation. Just as the U.S. has an economic policy, a defense policy, a health policy, and an education policy, it must have a democracy policy to signal that it cares about equal, equitable, and knowledgeable participation, and therefore, have legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

**BPPJ:** Looking down the road five to ten years, what are the outcomes that would signal to you that this initiative has been successful?

**DW:** The Initiative will have been successful if in five to ten years, GSPP and Berkeley are known for being the world’s leading location for understanding how public policy and government can advance democracy, so that it works for everyone. The pathways to this success are groundbreaking research, a curriculum that enriches understanding, tools for practitioners that work, and conversations and programs renowned for providing insights and access to leading figures.

**BPPJ:** Professor Glover Blackwell, as the Initiative’s Chief Vision Officer, how do you see your role contributing to the goals that have been set forth?

**Angela Glover Blackwell (AGB):** As Chief Vision Officer, my role is to help define and shape the Initiative’s mission and vision, as well as lead in the development and articulation of the Initiative’s goals and objectives. Another key part of my role will be to identify social and academic opportunities for research and partnerships, which means that I will also work to attract external funders and collaborators so that our work can continue to scale.

The DPI has a vision for a flourishing democracy, which calls for a unique and essential approach to what is possible, particularly for our political and social institutions and what they can achieve when they genuinely prioritize and serve the needs of both people and the planet. I have spent my entire career advocating for equity, including the policies and programs needed to support a flourishing democracy, so I’m eager to begin.

**BPPJ:** What does a “flourishing democracy” mean to you, and how will the DPI contribute to this vision?

**AGB:** A flourishing democracy is a democracy that supports the things we all need to be able to have a good life—things like affordable housing, good schools, safe communities, a sustainable environment, jobs that provide for people to support themselves and their families, high quality health care, and a strong and reliable infrastructure upon which people can depend on shared economic and social advancement.

This support is provided systematically and structurally through strong government and public investment—through policies, programs, institutions, and funding at all levels, be it city, county, region, state, or federal. We can institutionalize human flourishing so everyone can have a good life.

**BPPJ:** Both you and the Dean have highlighted that community partnerships are a key area for the Initiative. How will the DPI work to bring in the voices of grassroots organizations and those leading on-the-ground engagement efforts within communities?

**AGB:** PolicyLink, the organization I founded 25 years ago, lifts up the wisdom of people living and working to solve problems within their communities. We have known that those closest to the problems are closest to articulating lasting solutions. The vision and mission of DPI will be infused with the same sensibilities and values.

The DPI will partner with, and be guided by, grassroots voices, recognizing that the wisdom and creativity within every community is essential to solving problems. And, when we solve problems with nuance and specificity for those who need support the most—like those who the data and historical record make clear have systematically and structurally been kept behind—we create the conditions for everybody to flourish.

**BPPJ:** Professor Grumbach, democracy is a monumental issue. Where do you begin?

**Jacob Grumbach (JG):** Democracy is a big concept, which is why political-philosophical debates about democracy over centuries, if not millennia, have been crucial. My own views have been informed by philosophies of different kinds of democracy—most importantly electoral democracy, liberal democracy, and egalitarian or social democracy.

Electoral democracy is about the people making their voices heard through voting in free, fair, and competitive elections, and that people’s votes should count equally. Liberal democracy is about civil rights and liberties, freedom from authoritarianism, equality

under the law, and all that. Egalitarian or social democracy suggests that electoral and liberal democracy aren’t realized if there isn’t some kind of material equality.

**BPPJ:** It sounds like the Initiative will explore a few different avenues when it comes to the characteristics of a well-functioning democracy. What other areas of research do you hope to explore through the Initiative?

**JG:** I do research on varying democracy issues—some is straight up quantitative research on voting and elections, fair legislative districting, and other times it’s looking at the impact of money in politics and political inequality. Another line of research focuses on how to build social solidarity across racial groups, which I think is necessary to prevent democracy from failing.

I’ve also looked at how the labor movement has contributed to the fight for voting rights and democracy. With the DPI, I’m not only ramping up these lines of research, but also doing more to connect the research to organizations, policymakers, and ordinary people who want to know about the state of democracy, and how to protect and expand it.

**BPPJ:** Are there areas where you see the greatest opportunities for advancement?

**JG:** Well for starters, we don’t actually have a ton of tools to protect or advance democracy. A lot of commentators talk about running better election campaigns with better “messaging” to ensure that anti-democratic candidates don’t get to office. Sure, I guess. But there have been so many major transformations over the past 50 years or so—economic, technological, demographic, and even environmental. We need to think about designing policy, electoral institutions, and mass membership organizations that can operate in this new world. In terms of

institutions, we need to think hard about proportional representation and other setups that can handle our nationalized, multi-dimensional mass politics. In terms of organizations, I believe the labor movement is our last, and best, hope to build solidarity between, like, the barista Gen-Z kid and the middle-aged guy in the trades.

**BPPJ:** Professor Glover Blackwell, what are three things that you want the Goldman, and broader Berkeley, community to know about this Initiative?

**AGB:** Limiting it to three will be difficult, but I’ll say this—democracy policy has twin pillars: participation and promise. These are central tenets of democracy.

Participation as a pillar of democracy is well established. The DPI will leverage the expansiveness of the field with a focus on protecting the processes of democracy, by developing strategies for ensuring all people have the ability to participate, as equals, in the processes impacting our lives. This is an emerging and fast growing field in democracy policy and this space will benefit from the kind of community-driven, expert assisted approach being put forward by the DPI.

Second, defining and scaffolding the promise of democracy, particularly for human flourishing, remains a vast and exciting opportunity for the Initiative. What policies, practices, and institutions meet the demands of a democracy that functions in service of human flourishing? What are the north stars for governance? What political and social strategies support the transition towards a democracy that centers human flourishing? All these remain important and exciting open questions for the DPI to answer.

As I mentioned, this will be an academic research institute guided by the wisdom and

experience of people on the ground working towards solutions for their communities. While there is an abundance of high-quality research, policy, and practice institutions aimed at democracy policy, the Initiative is positioned to fill the gap in terms of bringing together top tier researchers, policy practitioners, and community-driven solutions to transform democracy in the state of California and, ultimately, the nation. The truly equal and collaborative partnerships forged through this work will set another standard in what is essential as we work towards building a flourishing democracy for all.

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