

Leverhulme Doctoral Scholarships Programme for Interdisciplinary Resilience Studies (PIRS) University of Southampton

RECRUITMENT CYCLE for studentships starting: October 2025 (Cohort 2)

SUPERVISORY TEAM

| | |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| Primary Supervisor | Dr Daniel Devine |
| School & Faculty: | ESPS, FSS |
| Email: | d.devine@soton.ac.uk |
| | |
| Co-Supervisor | Prof. Nick Clarke |
| School & Faculty: | GES, FELS |
| Email: | n.clarke@soton.ac.uk |
| | |
| Additional Co-Supervisor(s): | |
| School & Faculty: | |
| Email: | |

STUDENTSHIP PROJECT TITLE

Democratic Resilience, Identities, and Geographical Imaginaries

OVERVIEW

This project conceptualises and empirically tests how identities – broadly conceived – and how they interact with distributive concerns, such as unemployment, to support or undermine democratic resilience. Co-supervised between Politics and Geography, it will build on new methods in both to contribute to a broad understanding of (democratic) resilience.

SUMMARY

This project seeks to understand how intersecting identities shape and influence democratic resilience with a focus on the UK. Democratic resilience is defined as the capacity to withstand, adapt to, or recover from shocks and stressors without losing democratic quality. This project will explore how diverse identities—including national, local, and social dimensions—both bolster and potentially destabilize democratic

norms. We will extend the scholarly work in Geography and Political Science to examine the role of *imaginative geographies*—how individuals perceive their area and nation in a global context—and their impact on democratic attitudes and behaviors.

Employing an interdisciplinary approach, the project aims to achieve three key objectives: developing a theoretical model for democratic resilience; empirically testing how different identities generate support for democratic norms; and exploring variations in political culture influenced by geographic imagination and subgroup characteristics such as education and region. Methods will include qualitative (interviews, focus groups) and quantitative (surveys, experiments), enabling the PhD candidate to develop the project along their own interests whilst obtaining a comprehensive methodological toolkit.

The impact will be to develop a conceptualisation and theorisation of ‘democratic resilience’, test it comprehensively in the UK, and to empirically test ‘imaginative geographies’. Outside of academia, there is potential to feed into how political actors can mobilise different identities to enhance democratic resilience.

Co-supervised between Politics and Geography, there are also active interdisciplinary and disciplinary research groups including the Centre for Democratic Futures; Economic, Society, and Governance; and Public Opinion Research Southampton.

PROJECT CONCEPT

Rationale

Democratic regimes are increasingly contested; even if this is not against ‘rule by democracy’ in general, it is against more specific cases: elections, the rights of certain groups to citizenship, or the legitimacy of specific democratic institutions and safeguards ([IDEA, 2024](#)). Given this, the scholarship on how to make democracies *resilient* has accelerated in recent years, particularly since 2016 (Holloway and Manwaring, 2023). Our working definition of democratic resilience is: ‘the capacity to withstand, adapt to, or recover from shocks and stressors without losing democratic quality’ (Riedl et al, 2024; Merkel and Lührmann, 2021).

A perceived loss of democratic resilience is, in part, because of a change of political conflicts in Western democracies from primarily distributive conflicts that the institutions were designed to reconcile (who gets what, when, and how) to constitutive conflicts related to *who* is or should be *part of* the democratic system, which centre around different identities: national identities, class, local identities, sexuality, gender, and many others (Riedl et al, 2024, p5). Identities provide meaning and attachment to the democratic system which provides a ballast in the face of economic, technological, and other shocks, but also provide an opportunity to be mobilised *against* the democratic system, generating instability. Similarly, a focus on these identities may

generate backlash from parts of the public that still *do* focus on bread-and-butter (re)distributive concerns.

This project will examine theoretically and empirically how to increase democratic resilience by focusing on how intersecting identities undermine or enhance democratic attitudes. Combining geography and political science literatures, we propose to also explore how people's *imaginative geographies* (Clarke and Moss, 2021) of their, and Britain's, place in the world shape attitudes which support greater democratic resilience. That is, alongside existing identities, we will explore the impact of how one identifies with their area and nation and the *content* of that identity. In doing so, it will also study the *salience* of identities and democracy concerns, relative to other core (re)distributive concerns, such as inflation and welfare spending. Our core expectation is that those whose identities are (self-identified) associated with core democratic norms will be more likely to support democratically resilient behaviour. An example of this may be those whose imaginative geography of Britain is one of the defence and spread of democratic government may be more likely to foster democratic norms than those whose is about the spread of Empire.

Objectives

The project has three key research objectives (ROs).

RO1: To develop a theoretical, interdisciplinary model of definition for *democratic resilience*.

RO2: To empirically test which, and how, different identities generate diffuse and specific democratic support.

RO3a: To explore how democratically supportive political cultures vary by geographical imagination;

RO3b: To explore how these imaginations vary by relevant subgroups (e.g., geographical variation, education).

Although these issues affect all democracies, the empirical parts of this project will focus on the UK, with the potential to expand to other countries. This will enable the research to develop a set of specific and targeted recommendations for use for, amongst others: political parties; UK parliament and local and devolved authorities; and democratic civil society organisations.

Methods

The methods to achieve these research through a mixed methods and interdisciplinary approach, exploiting the breadth of experience of the supervisory team.

RO1 will be primarily theoretical. ‘Democratic resilience’ has been under-theorised in political science. The project will theorise it more fully drawing on mature literatures in Geography and related fields (ecology, evolutionary theory, systems thinking). This is a great promise of embedding such a project within the Programme for Interdisciplinary Resilience Studies. It will also embed this with a more empirical model of democratic resilience in European democracies drawing on political science literature on democratic stability.

RO2 will use both qualitative (e.g., in depth interviews and focus groups) and quantitative (e.g., large-scale surveys and survey experiments) methods. The two complement each other, with the qualitative work providing key data on how people balance their different identities and its relationship (if any) to democratic resilience, understand issues of democratic erosion and backsliding, and how they think about these issues in relation to both other issues (e.g. ‘the economy’). The quantitative analysis will study whether this is generalisable, and provide causal evidence (through survey experiments) on the importance of the framing of identities and imaginative geographies for fostering democratic cultures.

RO3 will use these qualitative and quantitative data to model a multilevel regression with poststratification to map how the different identities intersect to create democratically supportive political cultures, building on recent developments in polling.

Wider implications

The major wider implication – not least indicated by the 2024 US election – is to improve understanding of how concerns regarding democratic health and resilience interact with both other concerns and identities in the decision-making of voters. The proposed research promises to improve such understanding. This has a practical implication: pro-democracy actors (politicians, parties, campaigners, activists) will understand these processes better and be better placed to design effective political communication in the service of democratic resilience. This impact will be plausible through the lead supervisor, who is actively working with [Campaign Lab](#) to deliver large-scale field experiments on political campaigns.

Contribution to interdisciplinary resilience studies

Whilst ‘resilience’ is an established (albeit not uncontested) concept in other fields, in political science it is underused, and ‘democratic resilience’ is heavily under-conceptualised (Holloway and Manwaring, 2023) with only recent efforts to address this (Boese et al, 2021; Lührmann, 2021; Riedl et al, 2023). A necessary part of the project will be to conceptualise ‘democratic resilience’, contributing to the development of resilience studies within political science and drawing on other disciplines with a particular focus on how resilience is used within geography and

related fields (ecology, evolutionary theory, systems thinking). This promises to be a very substantial theoretical and conceptual contribution.

Existing empirical work, meanwhile, is relatively thin on the sources of democratic resilience, given the only recently adopted use of the term. In addition, there is less large-scale quantitative work on imaginative geographies and how they contribute to broader political culture(s); indeed, we are not aware of quantitative-empirical operationalisations of ‘imaginative geographies’ in existing work. The project’s focus on how different identities can anchor democratic resilience and how this varies across, and is rooted in, different geographies, is a novel contribution to interdisciplinary resilience studies, political science, and geography.

Please list and describe any specific/additional technical training or support to undertake and successfully deliver this project. *Note that students recruited into this programme will undertake a bespoke training curriculum. Students and their supervisory teams will also identify generic skills gaps to address through training courses offered by the University's Doctoral College.*

The PhD is relatively advanced methodologically, both qualitatively (e.g., in focus group delivery) and quantitatively (e.g., design of experiments and polling methods). The specific training required will depend on the existing skillset of the candidate. However, such courses are available at Southampton through the NCRM and PAIR can also fund short courses. Both proposed supervisors also have substantial experience in qualitative (Prof. Clarke) and quantitative (Dr Devine) methods.
