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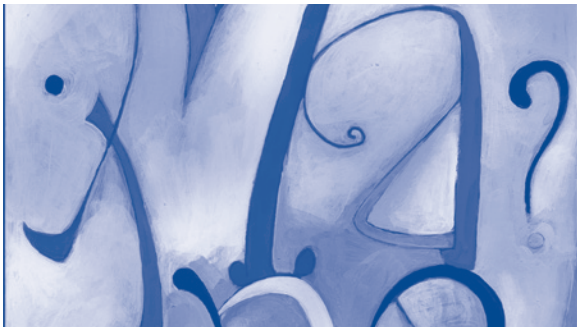

In the Public Interest:

A Discussion with Theda Skocpol about the Scholars Strategy Network

by Luisa S. Deprez

Amy Fried

Luisa Deprez and Amy Fried interview Theda Skocpol about the Scholars Strategy Network (SSN). The SSN was founded to serve as a bridging organization to help university-based researchers and teachers to get involved in public debates and make their research and ideas accessible to fellow citizens, legislators, and journalists. The SSN includes scholars from many disciplines who share research about public policy issues, elections and civic life, as well as ideas for improvements in legislation and government practices.

PREFACE

Scholars in institutions of higher learning—colleges and universities—have long been regarded as writers whose work is not readily accessible to a wide array of policymakers, practitioners, and general readers. As a result, much of the excellent research they do on matters of public interest receives little attention outside of scholarly circles. Perhaps even more importantly, their research does not get into the hands of those who can use it to consider and promote positive and constructive change.

This situation is now set to change with the creation of the Scholars Strategy Network (SSN). To find out more about the SSN, we asked Theda Skocpol, Victor S. Thomas Professor of Government and Sociology at Harvard University and Director of the Scholars Strategy Network, to discuss it with us.

INTERVIEW

LD and AF: *Can you talk a bit about the Scholars Strategy Network and the inspiration behind its creation?*

TS: The idea percolated for several years among key people on the steering committee. For some time, it has been clear that a lot of excellent scholars who work in universities and colleges around the country would like to be more fully engaged in public discussions—not just about what is or is not the right policy to deal with a problem such as job creation or environmental protection or immigration reform, but also about how to make our governments and our democracy work better.

There is a very long tradition in American professional and academic life of civic engagement by university researchers and teachers. In recent decades, however, that has broken down somewhat. [Washington] DC, for example, is its own world, with specialized think tanks and advocacy groups and lobbyists for each little area of public policy. People in DC speak an insider language full of technical details and acronyms. And while researchers who work for think tanks are involved in this DC world, university people around the country often are not, unless they move to DC to work for one president or another.

Also, a lot of important work gets done in the states—and a lot of what counts is public opinion as it is shaped in the media and in citizens' groups and social movements. Some university people are very involved in those discussions and movements, but others are not. Sadly, too much of academic life these days is hyper-specialized, with each professional group speaking its own insider language. Hence, a lot of good research gets published in specialized books or academic articles, but the findings and ideas never get translated into general public discussion.

...it has been clear that a lot of excellent scholars who work in universities and colleges around the country would like to be more fully engaged in public discussions....

So a number of us worked for several years to create a bridging organization to make it more inviting for university-based researchers and teachers to get involved in public debates and make their research and ideas accessible to fellow citizens, legislators, and journalists. At first, we did not quite know how to do it. We knew we wanted groups in various regions along with a national office. We also knew we wanted to involve scholars from many disciplines and ask them to share research about public opinion, elections and civic life, as well as ideas for improvements in legislation and government practices.

LD and AF: *So, knowing this, how did you move forward?*

TS: After some experimentation in 2009, we realized we needed an approach to building SSN in which every member would have things to do and every participant would count. A year ago, we discovered a good way to proceed and have been growing fast and being effective in bridge-building ever since. People in colleges and universities all across the country are invited to join. Each person has a profile highlighting areas of expertise, media contributions, and engagement in civic life

and public-policy efforts, and each person writes briefs to convey important ideas and research findings in everyday language.

LD and AF: *Does SSN focus on particular policy areas?*

TS: Not exactly, and this is how we are different from many existing organizations that try to inject research into public debates. We are casting a very wide net, inviting scholars who work on everything from taxes and public budgets to health care to immigration to women's issues or U.S. foreign policy. The idea is to be ready with ideas, findings, and people no matter what pops up on the public agenda. And we want to include broader historical and philosophical perspectives too.

We have eight major areas, and each one breaks down further into subtopics. It is all at our website (www.scholarsstrategynetwork.org), which is set up to make it easy for everyone to search our offerings, our people, and our briefs. The eight major topics are the economy and public budgets; economic security; health care; American democracy; society and social issues; education; environment and energy; and America and the world. But as I say, each has a lot of searchable subtopics, too.

> ...we [SSN] are not like a think tank at all. We are eclectic across policy areas and areas of social and political relevance.

LD and AF: *Numerous national organizations already offer guidelines for policy and policy directions that have rather clear political inclinations. Is SSN in this same vein?*

TS: We have no SSN political orthodoxy. Everyone who joins subscribes to the classic progressive value, expressed well a hundred years ago by people such as Jane Addams and pioneering health reformer Isaac Max Rubinow of Columbia University, that it is part of a scholar's responsibility in American democracy to engage public issues and public discussions. But, each individual member decides for him or herself what that means in terms of endorsing candidates or parties or particular policies. We are proud of each member's engagement, and we don't try to downplay it if, for example, someone wants to write an op-ed for a candidate's position. But SSN as such, as a whole organization, is not allied with any other organization whatsoever and does not take electoral or even specific policy positions. We are open to connecting our members and those who use our ideas regardless of political persuasion.

It matters a lot that we are not just specialized in one policy area and that our members think about the democratic political process, not just ideal policies in the abstract. Members often explore public opinion about an issue—such as immigration—and write about how a good policy idea could gain public support. We are not just a bunch of ivory tower experts thinking up plans to impose on other people; we think about what our fellow citizens believe and want government to do (or not do).

In sum, we are not like a think tank at all. We are eclectic across policy areas and areas of social and political relevance. We include moral philosophers and historians as well as the most hard-nosed economists and statistical-type scholars. Although we are 90 percent university and college based, we have a few scholars from research institutes, but only those who regularly collaborate with university scholars. It is not, in my view, true that many think tanks engage university-based researchers; they usually have their own staff experts. And in any event, think thanks often speak in specialist and DC-centric languages laden with acronyms that regular citizens and people outside the Beltway do not understand at all.

SSN is filling a different niche, building much broader bridges. It is a different animal, not a bureaucracy with employees, but a network that leverages the work and commitment of excellent people already employed in colleges and universities.

LD and AF: *How are members solicited or invited to join the SSN? Are there criteria for membership, so to speak?*

TS: Each person who becomes a member fills out a profile that briefly and clearly describes up to six publications that speak to public issues, broadly conceived, and indicates his or her civic interests (for example, participating in the League of Women Voters, or testifying at a legislative hearing). The member's profile also lists/links to media appearances such as op-eds or radio programs or public talks. Each new member then works with us to write his or her first "vivid-English" two-page brief. This is usually a "key findings" brief that hits the important question, findings, and arguments of an already-published article or book or report. It may also be a two-page "basic facts" brief that draws from many scholarly sources to sum up what is known about an important issue or public dilemma, education, health care and the like.

Basic facts and key findings briefs are always two pages maximum and are carefully edited to remove all jargon, acronyms, and insider specialty language of any sort. We tell people to imagine how they would explain an issue and important bottom-line facts and findings to a neighbor or their aunt at Thanksgiving dinner. Beyond the short briefs, SSN will also develop 10-page strategy briefs that lay out evidence for various policy options at greater length. But the two-pagers are our bread and butter, and they are fascinating and easy to read.

LD and AF: *And the success of this approach—for individuals and for states and regions?*

TS: It has been very successful. More than 170 scholars across the U.S. have joined, or are in process of joining, with several more coming on board each week. Everyone from advanced graduate students to distinguished senior professors is welcome, and we are building membership in all parts of the country, across many disciplines: in history, social sciences, and parts of natural science dealing with health and environmental issues. Each member who joins is also welcome and encouraged to invite other colleagues on board.

When a cluster of members joins in a particular state such as Maine or in a community with various universities and colleges such as the North Carolina Research Triangle, we also look for pairs of organizers who will put together an SSN regional network. We have eight so far and will soon have more. Each regional network gets a small budget and has a chance to put on public events and to connect to state policymakers, media, and citizens groups in its own way. Some focus on themes, for example the Southwest SSN network focuses especially on immigration and health care, but most have a broad purview.

I would say that the Maine SSN Network, co-led by the two of you, is the rate-buster among regional SSN networks so far. It is recruiting a vibrant group of members from institutions all over the state, and has a regular op-ed column in the *Bangor Daily News*, where SSN members write on crucial issues for the general public. Maine SSNers have also made contacts with national and state legislators and their staffs to get factual analyses into their hands. And there are sure to be opportunities to cosponsor events or discussions with Maine associations and policy organizations such as the Maine Center for Economic Policy.

The other side of our work is active outreach to make members and briefs available to journalists and bloggers, policymakers, and civic groups such as the League of Women Voters, community-based nonprofit organizations, or state and local health-reform groups. We are having a lot of success because our briefs are easy to read and use. Once journalists or legislative staffers or civic group leaders read some briefs, they often contact SSN members directly and ask them to do other things. SSN will pay to send members to public forums. For example, one of our members is traveling to St. Louis in September to participate in a YWCA forum on how budget debates might affect the poor and nonprofits that serve them. We also have publicists working with us to help members turn their briefs into op-eds. We recently published one on Medicare vouchers in the *Tampa Tribune* and another one on current budget debates in the *Detroit Free Press*. The Maine SSNers, of course, regularly publish op-eds in the *Bangor Daily News* and sometimes in the *Portland Press Herald*.

LD and AF: *What are the benefits to a wide-ranging approach such as SSN's?*

TS: It has worked well to have a broad umbrella such as this. You never know what will come up in advance, and we almost always have good people with intelligent things to say—and briefs that say those things in ways anyone can understand. For example, when the shootings in Aurora, Colorado, happened, we had two members who had done wonderful work on gun violence and gun-control issues, so we could feature their work and their media contributions right away. The Supreme Court is taking up affirmative action this fall [2012], and we have one of the leading experts on the history and workings of affirmative action. We will feature his brief and journalists will be able to contact him. We have huge clusters of members who do excellent work on health reform in all aspects at both the state and national level, and on immigration issues at regional and national levels. These folks are called on all the time. We have many who work on tax and budget issues. That is a big deal in the 2012 election season and will be again when Congress turns to dealing with the "fiscal cliff" in late 2012 and early 2013. And we have a growing set of experts who think creatively about environmental policy. The Boston SSN network will sponsor a panel on efforts to fight global warming in February 2013.

A final point I should stress: we have people who know policy problems and possible solutions in all these areas. But we also have many scholars who know a lot about democratic politics: public opinion, election issues, and social movements. That allows SSNers to think and talk about making American democracy work better. For example, we have featured research that explores various kinds of electoral reforms, asking which do the best job of making elections honest and expanding citizen participation at the voting booth.

LD and AF: *How has—and will—SSN reach out to legislators, policymakers, advocates, and citizens groups to let them know what SSN members and SSN briefs have to offer?*

TS: We are developing different forms of outreach to all of the above: journalists and bloggers, policymakers, and citizen groups.

For journalists and bloggers, we have let dozens of them know already about the SSN website as a resource to find experts to talk with about stories, to get new ideas for stories, and to find briefs that quickly sum up crucial facts. A lot of journalists are delighted to hear about SSN, and many are using the website. We know because they call our members to follow up. Some of our briefs, which are pdfs that anyone can use or repost, have been linked to in articles and editorials. This July [2012], for example, the *New York Times* had an editorial about giving felons back the right to vote after they finish prison sentences that they linked to an SSN brief by member Christopher Uggen at the University of Minnesota, who has done empirical opinion research to show that most Americans favor restoring the right to vote after criminals pay their debt to society. *Bloomberg News* quoted one of our experts, Christine Percheski, in articles about the role of married women in the 2012 election. Similarly, *Huffington Post* had a piece on nonprofits that was linked to a brief by one of our experts in that area, Scott Allard, of the University of Chicago. And as I mentioned earlier, SSN itself has publicists working to help our members develop and place op-eds, using their two-page briefs as a starting point.

We place a lot of stress on getting things into regional newspapers, not just the national outlets such as the *New York Times*. And when our members do publish op-eds, we feature them on our website under "SSNers in the News," so the ideas get even broader circulation. A number of Maine op-eds have been featured this way.

For policymakers, we rely on regional groups and members to reach out to state and national legislators and their staffs. That has happened here in Maine, and in New Mexico the regional group includes staffers from Martin Heinrich, now in the House of Representatives and running for the Senate. Relevant SSN briefs have been sent to the office of Senator Sherrod Brown in Ohio, and so forth. In addition, we have active ties in Washington, DC. SSN and many of its briefs have been described and introduced to caucuses in the House of Representatives. Several SSNers did a consultation on health reform options just before the Supreme Court decision on the Affordable Care Act.

In some ways, the most exciting frontiers are with civic groups. In several states, SSNers and units of the League of Women Voters are cooperating—we have good experts and briefs on how to make elections worked better—and we are now cooperating to do public forums with the YWCA and with the Coalition on Human Needs. We have ties to the Center for Community Change, which works with community groups across the country. And many SSNers work with health-reform groups and labor groups in the states as well as nationally. It is a top priority in my mind to deepen ties between our members and civic, community, and citizens associations at the local, state, and national levels.

LD and AF: *What, in your opinion, makes for success? For SSN's success?*

TS: I have already given a lot of examples of successful outreach to participate in policy discussions and public debates, so I won't repeat those. Success means in part doing more and more of that, and finding new ways to help our members publish op-eds, give public talks, and sit down with policymakers who want some depth on a knotty issue.

Success also means drawing in more and more good people from colleges and universities. We will soon have additional regional networks—four to six new ones are in the process of forming—and I personally aspire to sign up members in every one of the 50 states! SSN is proving an attractive idea to many scholars. When I sit down with younger scholars, for example, and explain that they can keep right on doing their specialized research, publishing in academic journals, but also, at the same time, use our briefs to get their ideas out to broader audiences, their eyes light up. There is a huge untapped yearning for engagement with fellow American citizens among university and college scholars. SSN offers a way to do that. We need to keep spreading the word. Every member becomes a recruiter of others. It is working so far, and even though the effort has taken an overwhelming amount of time from me and others, we are on a roll and will keep going.

The Maine Chapter

By Luisa Deprez and Amy Fried

We are excited to be a part of the national Scholars Strategy Network and to be involved in bringing together a group of extremely insightful and knowledgeable individuals from across Maine. Both of us are active scholars who conduct academic research and publish and present our views to other academics. But we are also citizens who strongly believe we have an obligation to share our research, findings, and expertise with policymakers, journalists, nonprofits, and the public.

Maine SSNers are engaged in an array of research activities from varying perspectives. They are united by a broad and deep commitment to climb out of the ivory tower and participate actively in the public arena. Examples include sociologist Amy Blackstone (University of Maine) who contributes her expertise on changing families and on sexual harassment in the workplace; political scientist Robert Glover (University of Maine) considers immigration legislation's impacts on the young; social work professor Sandy Butler (University of Maine) provides information and insight into Maine policy efforts such as Parents as Scholars and the Competitive Skills Scholarship Program; John Dorrer (program director, Jobs for the Future) delves deeper into unemployment including its structural components and consequences; Lynne Miller (University of Southern Maine) explores further how Representative and Vice-Presidential nominee Paul Ryan's budget proposals would undercut American education; Jennifer Wriggins (University of Maine School of Law) looks at how mandatory auto insurance helps us to makes sense of the individual mandate in health reform; and Michael Howard (University of Maine) brings attention to issues of global warming. We (Luisa and Amy) also wrote a brief specifically tailored to Maine that looks quite carefully at the high stakes of the Ryan budget for the state.

What we see in SSN, both in the state of Maine and nationally, is a wide array of scholars writing on timely, contemporary topics. It will continue to be our intent to ensure that legislators and policymakers have access to timely, sound research on the array of issues confronting the state and nation to enable them to develop and implement sound, substantial, and useful policies.

Please turn the page for information about the authors.

Martha Stewart

Theda Skocpol is the Victor S. Thomas Professor of Government at Harvard University and the national director of the Scholars Strategy Network, which brings together scholars across the country to address public challenges and their policy implications. Her most recent books include *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* (with Vanessa Williamson) and *Health Reform and American Politics: What Everyone Needs to Know* (with Lawrence Jacobs).

Luisa S. Deprez is professor in the Department of Sociology and in the Women and Gender Studies Program at the University of Southern Maine. She has written *The Family Support Act of 1988: A Case Study of Welfare Policy in the 1980s* (2002) and coedited *Shut-Out: Low Income Mothers and Higher Education in Post-Welfare America* (2004), along with numerous journal articles and book chapters about the restrictions of current welfare policy on low-income women seeking to access higher education. Deprez is co-leader of the Maine chapter of the Scholars Strategy Network.

Amy Fried is a professor of political science at the University of Maine. Co-leader of the Maine chapter of the Scholars Strategy Network and biweekly columnist for the *Bangor Daily News*, Fried's most recent book is *Pathways to Polling: Crisis, Cooperation and the Making of Public Opinion Professions*.