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Rachel Williams '23 to Present Research at Prominent Political Science Conference

March 31, 2023

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — Over the past year, political science student Rachel Williams '23 has been researching why certain businesses litigated for religious accommodations from the contraceptive mandate of the Affordable Care Act — and her work is gaining attention from top scholars in the field.

On April 13, 2023, Williams will present her work in an undergraduate poster session of the Midwest Political Science Association Conference in Chicago. [The Midwest Political Science Association](#) (MPSA) is the second largest political science group in the country, and their annual conference is attended by the nation's top scholars.

According to her mentor, Ben and Susan Rhodes Endowed Professor in Peace and Social Justice and Professor of Political Science James Simeone, MPSA “only accepts a handful of undergraduate posters each year, and Rachel's is one of them.”

“[Her poster] is in the American politics and constitutional law area and it will be vetted by two very prominent political scientists in that subfield,” said Simeone. “Her work is first-rate both substantively and methodologically — I predict the reviewers will be very impressed with her paper.”



Political science major Rachel Williams '23 presents her research at a national conference in Washington, D.C.

Williams' research interest was prompted by the controversial 2014 Supreme Court ruling in *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc.* 573 U.S. 682 which “left many legal scholars with questions about why businesses like Hobby Lobby litigated in the first place,” Williams said.

Her work responds to the assumption that businesses pursued legal exemptions from the requirement to provide their employees with contraception for primarily religious reasons.

“Adopting an explanation from Gregory Lipper, an attorney and legal scholar, my work hypothesizes that politics may have motivated businesses to litigate,” said Williams, a political science major. “This is an important question because if businesses were litigating for reasons other than religious beliefs, that may impact how we calculate the ‘harm’ being done to women employees and female dependents whose contraceptive coverage was restricted.”

Simeone said Williams' work “has been unique in that she has completed her research over three semesters and her work has been accepted in each phase of its development at three conferences along the way.”

In addition to first attending a Conference for Students of Political Science at Illinois State University in 2022, Williams next presented her paper “Religious Accommodations from the Contraceptive Mandate: Sincere Belief or Political Statement?” at the Pi Sigma Alpha National Student Research conference in Washington, D.C., on Feb. 18, 2023.

Simeone encouraged Williams to submit her paper to the conference, and the Political Science Department funded Williams' travel and accommodations for her trip to D.C. to present her work.

Panel moderators at the D.C. conference included professors from George Washington University, which hosted the conference, and panelists received valuable feedback on their projects from political science Ph.D. candidates at Yale.

In addition to the professional feedback, Williams also learned from other panelists.

“Connecting with people my age who are interested in my topic isn't something I get to do very often. Outside of the conference, my family was able to make the trip to D.C., so we did some sightseeing and visited a few museums. It was an incredible experience to say the least,” Williams said.

For Williams, the process of developing and presenting her research has been transformative.

“The countless hours that I've spent on this project have taught me how far patience, determination and interest can take me. My work has presented me with new challenges and sparked an intellectual curiosity I didn't know I possessed before. It has opened doors and allowed me to connect with scholars and undergraduate peers across the nation. It has even made me reconsider my career path.”

As she nears graduation, Williams said she is applying to a wide range of jobs in the legal field and beyond to gain experience and prepare before attending law school.

Williams expressed her gratitude to the mentors at Illinois Wesleyan who have helped her develop this project over the last year.

“Without the guidance of the professors in the political science department, I would not have been able to present my work,” Williams said.

By Maria Harmon '23