



## Celebrating Theda Skocpol's Visionary Leadership at SSN

JANUARY 16, 2025

After years of extraordinary service, Theda Skocpol, the founder and Academic Director of the Scholars Strategy Network since its inception in 2011, will be stepping down from her role. Skocpol's visionary leadership began with a simple yet transformative idea: to create an organization that connects college- and university-based researchers with policymakers, civic leaders, and the media to address America's most pressing societal challenges. Her foresight and determination led to the founding of SSN, and her contributions have shaped every aspect of its work since.



"SSN got its start out of far-sighted partnerships—university scholars from several disciplines teaming up with civically minded, personally involved donors," said Skocpol of the organization's founding. "We all realized that the research and ideas generated by college and university professors across the United States often went unheard by fellow citizens and governments at all levels. New bridges needed to be built to allow academics to keep doing their day jobs, but at the same time participate in public efforts to improve public policymaking and inform public discussions."

One of SSN's defining features—a nationwide chapter model that helps researchers organize for policy change in their own backyards—directly reflects Skocpol's groundbreaking research. Her 2003 book *Diminished Democracy* on American civic life showed that membership-based organizations with federated networks are key to having a lasting impact, and she embedded these defining principles into the very DNA of the organization. "What I brought to the learning process, it seems to me, was a realization that we need ongoing chapters in as many states and regions as possible, not just one big central office," said Skocpol. This structure not only empowers local engagement but also underscores SSN's core mission: for research evidence to lead the way.

A renowned scholar, Skocpol's academic work spans an array of topics, including American politics, civic engagement, social policy, and the historical evolution of U.S. institutions. Her landmark book, *States and Social Revolutions*, established her as a leading theorist of social change, while her later works, such as the award-winning book *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*, shed light on the development of social policy and the American welfare state. Over the years, Skocpol has earned numerous accolades for her scholarship, including

the Johan Skytte Prize in Political Science and the American Political Science Association's James Madison Award, and she remains an influential voice in the study of democracy, politics, and public policy.

Since founding the organization with an initial group of 50 fellow researchers, Skocpol worked tirelessly as the organization's Academic Director to use her expertise to push SSN forward and support hundreds of new scholars to join the network. For years, she reviewed and edited every research brief published on the SSN website by its members, amplifying the voices of scholars on a broad variety of policy topics and helping to make their research accessible to policy actors. "Once a few of us—from Maine to Minnesota to Texas and California—figured out that writing short briefs in everyday English, not academic specialized jargon, was a good 'entry ticket' and that we could let each member or self-appointed group take public stands without requiring others to agree or sign on, SSN was off and running," said Skocpol.

In addition to the briefs, Skocpol also helped lead numerous working groups on issues ranging from healthcare reform to federal budgets and the future of U.S. democracy, convening some of the top researchers in each field to strategize about ways to inform policy decisions at every level of government. Finally, through her years of extraordinary service, Skocpol served as a mentor to countless SSN members and chapter leaders looking to jumpstart their own public engagement work.

As Skocpol steps back from her formal role, she will remain an integral part of SSN. She will continue to serve on the board and lend her knowledge and experience to support SSN's new Academic Director, Suzanne Mettler, during this important transition. Skocpol's contributions to SSN are immeasurable, and her legacy will shape the organization's work for years to come.

"The SSN staff has always been compact and creative and academics, myself included, have given their time voluntarily. But look at the huge growth of chapters and committed members," shared Skocpol. "By now, SSN is a vital force in many ways, and I am proud to support Suzanne Mettler as the new Academic Director. Thanks to her and to so many volunteer scholars and donors and creative staffers for all they have done and will keep doing."