

## **New crowdsourcing project lets you transcribe U.S. Supreme Court justices' handwritten notes**

*Transcriptions provide unprecedented access to the justices' conversations*

MINNEAPOLIS / ST. PAUL (02/13/2018) — If you have ever wanted to be a fly on the wall during deliberations by U.S. Supreme Court justices or travel back in time to witness Supreme Court decisions, a new crowdsourcing project led by researchers at the University of Minnesota and Michigan State University allows you to do just that – and more!

The project, named [SCOTUS Notes](#), is the newest citizen science project under the Zooniverse platform originated at the University of Minnesota. Zooniverse, the world's largest and most popular people-powered online research platform, runs on support from volunteers – now numbering more than 1.5 million. These volunteers act as armchair scientists and archivists helping academic research teams with their projects from the comfort of their own homes.

In this project, members of the public transcribe handwritten notes from U.S. Supreme Court justices. Unlike members of Congress, justices cast their votes in complete privacy during weekly conference meetings. Only justices are allowed in the Chief Justice's conference room when they discuss, deliberate, and make initial decisions on cases that focus on some of the nation's most pressing legal issues. The only record of what has been said, and by whom, is provided by the handwritten notes the justices themselves take during conference. These crucial documents detail the discussions and debates that took place in thousands of cases spanning multiple decades.

“We couldn't do this work using only computers or hand coders,” said Timothy R. Johnson, one of the lead researchers and a University of Minnesota Morse Alumni Distinguished Teaching Professor of Political Science and Law. “The visual processing power and critical thinking of people is needed for a project like this.”

The transcription contributes to key research about law and politics, as each participant becomes a citizen archivist and transcriber, creating materials that will be of use and openly available to scholars interested in law, policy, and decision making in the nation's highest court.

Perhaps the most meaningful outcome is that the collaborative provides public access to documents of the Supreme Court in ways not possible to those who cannot access the Library of Congress or travel to law schools around the country. In so doing, this project also provides insights in a format that leads to a better understanding of the justices' decision-making process on a wide variety of important cases over the past half century.

“Help from the public is a critical part of this project,” said research team co-leader Ryan Black, an associate professor of political science at Michigan State University. “It would have taken our small research team years to go through all of these data. The end result of

this project will enhance how lawyers, researchers, and the public understand both what went on behind the scenes in these decisions and, more generally, how the most secretive of our three branches operates,” Black added.

Together, the members of the general public will transcribe more than 25,000 pages of Supreme Court conference notes that have been digitized from archives at a variety of sites including the Library of Congress, Washington and Lee Law School, and Yale Law School. Those participating receive a tutorial on the Zooniverse platform before beginning their transcription work. If people are unsure about their classifications, the platform includes a discussion forum feature where they can talk with other participants and, importantly, directly with the research team.

“Projects such as these really highlight the interdisciplinary nature of citizen science that draws upon the expertise of researchers from humanities, social and physical sciences, and engineering,” said Lucy Fortson, a University of Minnesota physics and astronomy professor and one of the founders of the Zooniverse platform. “This project is a perfect fit for the Zooniverse platform.” Fortson has worked on other Zooniverse crowdsourcing projects that have used the public’s help to identify galaxies in millions of telescope images, sort photos from camera traps in the Serengeti, and transcribe more than 15,000 Civil War telegrams.

To join the SCOTUS Notes project, visit the [Zooniverse website scotusnotes.org](http://Zooniverse website scotusnotes.org). Also follow the project on Twitter [@SCOTUSNotes](https://twitter.com/SCOTUSNotes) or its blog at <https://scotusnotes.wordpress.com/>.

The Law and Social Sciences Program of the National Science Foundation (NSF) provides the funding needed to collect, organize, and prepare the digital images used for this project (SES-1556270 and SES-1556227).