NSF Award from Social, Behavioral and Economic Sciences

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- **Project:** Collaborative Research: Updating the U.S. Supreme Court Judicial Database
- **Start Date:** September 1, 2009
- **Total Award Amount:** $366,212

**How the results of this project will benefit society:**
For two decades now, virtually all systematic analysis of the contemporary Supreme Court and its members have relied on Harold J. Spaeth’s U.S. Supreme Court Judicial Database. This holds for research conducted by social scientists and, increasingly, by legal academics; and it holds for quantitative and qualitative studies, as well as those more descriptive in nature. In fact, several inventories of peer-reviewed journals show that it is the rare article on the Court that derives its data from an alternative source. Monographs published by top presses also regularly rely on the Database, and the many numerical studies of the Court receiving public attention in recent years have made liberal use of the data it houses. Spaeth’s product is one of those rare creatures in the law and social science world: an invention that has substantially advanced a large area of study. Without question, the Database has empowered scholars in many disciplines to conduct original, path-breaking research of the highest intellectual merit.

**The problem the project is trying to solve:**
The Database is now starting to show its age. Along these lines, we see two major sets of issues. First, for many scholars and their students the Database is difficult to use. Second, the Database, with its emphasis on the modern (post-1946) Court, has not kept pace with scholarly interests. Historical institutionalism and its various subsets have pushed scholars to broaden their time horizons. Within the field of public law, analysts have created a veritable cottage industry devoted to studies of the Court of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Even judicial specialists who ground their work in the 21st century are beginning to apply modern social science methodologies to historical data, with the goals of testing theories of institutional development and illuminating current-day practices and patterns.

**How this project will work:**
With prior support from the National Science Foundation, we have addressed the first concern and brought the Database in line with 21st century technology. We now address the second issue. Specifically, we broaden the Database’s scope by adding many more cases: the 19,675 resolved between 1792, the year of the Court’s first published decision and 1946, the earliest year in the current Database. Our hope is that systematic, historical data on the Court will create an even more valuable public, multi-user Database that will stimulate scholars and their students to explore new avenues of inquiry, as well as to revisit enduring questions that have yet to be addressed with reliable and valid data. In short, the project not only facilitates scholarship of the highest level of intellectual merit; it also has a broader impact on the community of scholars studying the Court by providing a highly reliable, comprehensive, and adaptable Database.

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