POLITICAL SCIENCE PROFESSOR EXAMINES HUMAN RIGHTS CLAIMS IN EU COURTS

The European Union (EU) has long focused primarily on economic integration. But political scientist Lisa Conant's latest research examines a recent policy expansion of the EU: as the EU enlarges to include the post-communist democracies of Central and Eastern Europe, its focus has grown to include human rights protection.

Conant's latest publication explains that individuals residing in newer democracies, which historically have had inadequate human rights protection and ineffective rule law, are now flooding the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) with claims. This influx of human rights claims has been dubbed the 'stampede for justice.'

"I'm broadly interested in how Europeans deploy European-wide courts to pursue the goals of the European Convention on Human Rights that would not be possible under national law," said Conant, associate professor of political science.

Conant's recent article "Compelling Criteria? Human Rights in the European Union" will be part of a special issue on EU enlargement for the Journal of European Public Policy. The primary function of her contribution is to show how the enlargement of the EU to Eastern countries has led the EU to cover individual and minority rights protections for the first time. Her article explores which criteria on human rights established by the EU have been met by its post-communist democracies, and other transitional democracies such as Greece, Portugal, Spain, Cyprus and Malta.

She has found that transitional democracies have progressed substantially in respecting human rights. But she concludes that "EU human rights commitments remain shallow and transitions to rights-respecting democracies are reversible." For example, her research shows that Hungary—an early Central European reformer—has been back-sliding on many indicators of human rights protection and democratization. Also, Bulgaria, Greece and Romania are persistent laggards that challenge the transformative impact of the EU.

Conant's research, which she conducts in English, French and German, has influenced academic debates about the role of the European Court of Justice (ECJ) in European integration and domestic politics in Europe. Her research also provides new learning opportunities for her students at DU. Select students have had opportunities to assist with gathering quantitative types of data. She hopes more students can have opportunities to participate in qualitative coding research in the future.
She also shares her research with students in class. "Elite interviews I conduct during field research and the information I find in archives on cases at the ECHR provide me with information to share with students that you can't find in a typical textbook," said Conant. "These sources usually bring interesting stories and a human face to what might otherwise seem like dry legal concepts to students."