Executive Summary

The Stanford Deliberative Democracy Lab, in collaboration with Helena and various partners has conducted a national Deliberative Poll® to determine what Americans would really think about possible reforms to our democracy and our electoral processes if they had a chance to weigh the options under good conditions. This project received crucial support from Porticus, the Skoll Foundation, the Thiry-O’Leary Foundation, and other donors.

What would Americans really think if they could discuss the issues in depth in moderated small group discussions with fellow citizens, if they had access to vetted and balanced briefing materials, and if they could get their questions answered by panels of competing experts representing different points of view? While many commentators think that our political differences are intractable, particularly on issues of how to conduct our elections or how to change our democracy, the results detailed below show many significant changes toward bipartisan agreement, even on the most contentious issues.

Overview of What Happened

After deliberation, the participants – all of whom were registered voters – moved toward bipartisan agreement on some key electoral mechanics of our democracy and on certain reforms for how the system’s many problems should be fixed. These are issues that are highly polarized along partisan lines. Who should be able to vote? How can they register? The deliberators, whether Democrats, Republicans or Independents, came to support online voting registration and registration on election day for those with government issued IDs. Republicans came to disagree with the idea that making voter registration easier would increase the risk of voter fraud. There was strong agreement across party differences that convicted felons should have a right to vote.

There was also strong bipartisan support for making the chief election officer (the Secretary of State) in each state a non-partisan (non-elected) official, that redistricting should be conducted via non-partisan commissions. Of the various electoral system reforms, Ranked Choice Voting drew the widest support, achieving majority support overall for all six applications, although for some contexts, the Republicans did not move at all. On some other issues, it was Democrats who moved to support majority Republican proposals, such as requiring that all voting machines produce a paper record verified by the voter, or that every election be audited with a random sample of ballots to ensure that the votes are accurately counted. Or that the size of the Supreme Court be fixed at nine members by constitutional amendment. There were many striking, large movements of opinion by members of both parties, as well as by Independents moving in statistically significant ways toward a depolarized, shared bipartisan position.

There was also overwhelming support for promoting opportunities for people of diverse backgrounds to deliberate together on issues confronting their communities and the country. This proposal had large movements of support across all party differences.
These results demonstrate that our strong political disagreements are not intractable. They are not “calcified” as some have recently argued. Rather, when our citizens can discuss the issues together in moderated, evidence-based civil discussion, they arrive at a great deal of cross-party agreement in the opinions they register in confidential questionnaires. Their considered judgments and the reasons for them, should provide a guide to potential reforms.

How it worked
NORC at the University of Chicago convened a national sample of nearly 600 deliberators and a separate control group to consider reform proposals from across the political spectrum. The samples were recruited from NORC’s probability-based AmeriSpeak® panel. The deliberations lasted an entire weekend or, for some respondents, the equivalent of a weekend in time in weeknight meetings over two weeks. All participants completed confidential questionnaires detailing their opinions and knowledge on the issues, both before and after the deliberations. The control group did not receive the briefing materials and did not participate in the deliberations. The NORC Project Methods and Transparency Report is listed below for further details.¹

Stanford Online Deliberation Platform
The small group discussions were conducted on the Stanford Online Deliberation Platform, which moderated the video-based discussions, controlled the queue for talking, nudged those who had not volunteered to talk, intervened when there was incivility (which there was little of), and moved the group through the agenda of policy proposals and their pros and cons. Near the end of each discussion, it also guided the groups in formulating key questions that they wished to pose to the panels of diverse experts in the plenary sessions. The Stanford Online Deliberation Platform is a collaboration between the Crowdsourced Democracy Team, led by Professor Ashish Goel, and the Deliberative Democracy Lab, both at Stanford University.

Advisory Committee
In consultation with a bipartisan advisory committee of 17 leading experts on democracy, election law and proposals for reform, the Stanford research team produced a list of 76 proposals for deliberation and identified key pro and con arguments applying to each proposal. An extensive briefing document on the proposals was produced and shared with the participants. It is available below (see attached briefing document with advisory committee, p. 53). Video versions of the briefings were produced to stimulate interest and increase accessibility for all participants.

Satisfaction with Democracy?
An initial question asked the participants how satisfied or dissatisfied they were “with the way democracy is working in the U.S.”(Q1). Across party differences they started out dissatisfied (72% overall, with Democrats at 65% and Republicans at 81%). However, the very process of deliberating together about potential reforms

¹ The tables below present the results in two ways: One approach combines independents who lean toward one party with the party members. The other approach counts both sets of party “leaners” with the independents. The results with each method are very comparable. Separate tables for “difference in difference” comparisons to the control group are also included. Generally, there were few significant changes in the control group.
seems to have lessened this dissatisfaction. They were still dissatisfied but not as dramatically. After deliberation, the level of dissatisfaction for the sample overall dropped significantly by 18 points to 54%.² Democrats dropped 11 points to 54% and Republican dissatisfaction dropped dramatically, by 31 points, to 50%.

**Voting and Ballot Access**

Some of the deliberations focused on the currently contentious issues of who can register to vote, when and how Americans are permitted do so, and whether partisans can in some way monitor or even interfere with the voting process or the counting of votes. While there were strong party differences on these issues before deliberation, afterwards, we found significant depolarization and increased cross-party agreement. Many proposals ended with overall majority support made possible by significant changes on the part of Republicans.

Support for “allowing citizens to register to vote online” (Q31) rose significantly from less than a majority (46%) to nearly a super-majority (65%). Support among Republicans rose significantly from only 30% to a bare majority, 50.4%. There was a similar increase in support for allowing “citizens to register to vote on Election Day with a government issued ID” (Q32). Overall support increased significantly from 57% to 64% while Republican support increased from 41% to 47%. Automatic voter registration also saw a significant increase: “Establish automatic voter registration for all eligible voters with an option to opt-out” (Q33) rose significantly from 48% to 56%, with Republicans increasing significantly by 13 points from 26% to 39%.

There was even more striking movement toward bipartisan support for the proposal to “Restore federal and state voting rights to citizens with felony convictions upon their release from prison” (Q35). Overall support increased by only a bare majority to super-majority, an increase of 17 points from 50% to 67%. Democrats, Independents and Republicans all increased their support, with Republicans moving significantly from minority to strong majority support (from 35 to 58%, an increase of 23 points). We can glean some insight into these large changes from the increase in disagreement that “Felons have shown that they are not capable of being responsible citizens” (EP8). The overall sample moved from 51% to 66% disagreeing, while Republicans moved 39% to 61% disagreeing, a significant change of 22 points.

The strong support for all these proposals after deliberation was consistent with a key value which all the deliberators came to embrace regardless of party: “Making sure everyone who wants to vote can do so” (question v8). Support for this value-laden goal increased 16 points overall from 75% to 91%, with Republicans increasing from 72% to 89%, a substantial increase of 17 points. In addition, there was more skepticism that “increased opportunities for voter registration open up more opportunities for voter fraud” (EP7). Republicans dropped in their support for this empirical claim from 56% to 30%, a large drop of 26 points. Support overall for this claim dropped to only 25%.

There was also a significant bipartisan increase in support for ballot access for third parties and independent candidates. “Make it easier for third parties and independent candidates to appear on the ballot” went up nearly 10 points overall from 58% to nearly 68%, with Republicans increasing by about the same amount (from 52% to 62%). Regardless of party divisions, after deliberating the participants wanted all voters, candidates and parties to have ballot access.

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² Throughout this analysis, the word “significantly” refers to a change that is statistically significant at the .05 level, meaning there is only a one in twenty chance of this change happening by chance.
Non-Partisan Election Administration and Redistricting

In some cases, the depolarizing movements toward overall majority support came from proposals that were primarily supported by Republicans at the start: This was true for audits with random samples of the ballots: “Have each state require its voting jurisdictions to conduct an audit of a random sample of ballots in each election to ensure that the votes have been accurately counted” (Q48). The Republicans started at a super-majority level of 71% moving even higher to 79% with the other major movement coming from Democrats, who moved from 44% to 58%, a gain of 18 points.

One of the potential guardrails for the democratic process is to have non-partisan officials in charge of election administration and the redistricting process. Such reforms would insulate the administration of elections and the terms of party competition from partisan pressures. The participants moved significantly toward bipartisan agreement about these reforms.

Before deliberation, 48% of the participants supported having “each state make its chief electoral officer (such as secretary of state) a non-partisan, non-elected professional position” (Q51). After deliberation this proposal rose to majority support at 54%. (Democrats increased from 52 to 58%, Republicans increased from minority to majority support—from 47% to 55%).

There were even more impressive increases in support for non-partisan redistricting commissions. Before deliberation only 44% of the participants supported the proposal to “Adopt within each state independent, non-partisan redistricting commissions to redraw the boundaries of state legislative and federal congressional districts” (Q53). After deliberation overall support rose significantly by 16 points to 60%. Support among Republicans rose even more dramatically--22 points from 33% to 55%.

A similar question asked if these redistricting commissions should be required by a new national law (Q54). In that case the increases were less, but the proposal still had majority support (52%) after deliberation.

Protecting Against Election Interference

There was super-majority support, both before and after deliberation for “criminal penalties for misleading, deceiving, or intimidating eligible voters from voting” (Q36). Overall support was 81% before deliberation and 84% after, with comparable levels of support across parties.

There was little support for allowing “political parties and other groups to act as observers at polling places and vote tabulation centers” (Q46). After deliberation this was supported by only 33% of the sample with a significant decline from Republicans (whose support dropped from 52% to 45%).

There was even less support for allowing “representatives from political parties and other groups to challenge the eligibility of voters as they cast their ballots at polling places and as officials count the votes at tabulation centers” (Q47). This proposal dropped to only 12% in overall support with Republicans dropping significantly from 37% to only 18%--a drop of 19 points.

The deliberators wanted protections against deception or intimidation of voters and vote counters and this concern applied to party representatives.
National Standards and Paper Records

Requiring paper records from all voting machines is another case where a proposal initially supported strongly by Republicans but not Democrats achieved overwhelming bipartisan support after deliberation because Democrats moved to the Republican position. "Require that all voting machines produce a paper record of the vote that the voter verifies and then drops in a ballot box" moved overall 55% to 63%, with Republicans starting at 73% (and ending at 71%) but with Democrats moving from only 44% 55%, a significant rise of 11 points.

There was also strong bipartisan support for "uniform national standards for in-person, mail-in and early voting for Congressional elections" (Q37). There was 66% overall support both before and after deliberation, with Democrats reaching 77% and Republicans 61%. This kind of bipartisan support also applied to strengthening "federal standards for election machines and infrastructure and for reporting requirements for security incidents" (Q44). This proposal rose from 69% to 75%, with Democrats rising significantly by 13 points from 62% to 75% and Republicans dropping by 7 points to end at 74%. Even with these ups and downs, there was bipartisan super-majority support.

There was no support, before or after deliberation, for leaving the regulation of voting machines and election infrastructure to the states. “Allowing states to continue setting their own standards for election machines and infrastructure” (Q45), received only 19% support overall after deliberation. Republican support rose significantly but only from 18% to 25%.

Ranked Choice Voting

Both before and after deliberation there was very little support for our current practice of “first past the post” elections. Only 33% of the sample overall supported keeping “the current ‘first past the post’ voting system in party primaries and in the general election” (Q15). Support among Republicans did increase from 42% to just under 50% but this increase was not statistically significant.

The one alternative to “first past the post” that attracted majority support after deliberation was Ranked Choice Voting, apparently because it would count all the preferences of all the voters about all the candidates. There were six proposals applying ranked choice voting to either the primary or the general election, and to local, state and congressional elections. In all six cases, the support for ranked choice voting rose significantly and by enough to take the level of support from minority to majority. In most of these cases, the Republicans increased their support significantly.

For example, overall support for ranked choice voting in the primaries for Congressional elections (Q6) went up from 44% to majority support at 53% (a significant gain of 9 points), with Republican support increasing significantly from 32 to 39%. (Q5). Even more dramatically, support for Ranked Choice Voting in the primaries in state elections went from 48% to 59% overall (a significant gain of 11 points), with Republicans increasing significantly from 33% to 48% (an increase of 15 points) and Democrats increasing from 62% to 69% (Q6). The same question was asked for local elections, and support for Ranked Choice Voting increased in a bipartisan way for both primaries and the general election. For example, for the general election, overall support started at 48% and rose significantly to 55%, while the Republican support rose significantly from 39% to 45% (Q10).
For the general election, Ranked Choice Voting also achieved overall majority support in all three questions. For example, for Ranked Choice Voting in the general election for Congressional elections (Q8), the overall support went up significantly from 47% to 52%, with Democrats increasing from 62% to 70%, Independents moving significantly from 42% to 53% but with Republicans trailing well behind, essentially unchanged (from 35% to 34%). For the general election for state elections (Q9), the overall support for Ranked Choice Voting went up from 46% to 57% (a significant increase of 11 points) with Democrats moving from 62% to 70%, Independents moving significantly from 41% to 65% (a gain of 24 points) and Republicans essentially unchanged (moving from 41% to 40%). Lastly, for Ranked Choice Voting in local elections (Q10), the overall support increased significantly from 48% to 55% with Democrats increasing from 59% to 64%, Independents from 45% to 56% and Republicans increasing significantly from 39% to 45%.

All six questions yielded majority support overall for ranked choice voting. One might speculate that for both major parties there was an openness to experimentation, but the issues may have been regarded as less consequential in the primaries or for state and local elections, than for the final decision in the general election.

There were two additional questions intended to shed light on the assumptions that might bear on support or opposition to Ranked Choice Voting. Both showed significant change toward a perspective more favorable to the proposal. First, agreement sharply increased that “Ranked-choice voting will better reflect the public’s views on all the candidates” (EP4). Overall, support for this proposition moved from 44% to 57%, a rise of 13 points. While Democrats and Independents increased significantly in this view, Republicans moved only slightly. A second empirical premise was about accepting or rejecting the argument that “Ranked-choice voting is too complicated to use” (EP9). Disagreement with this critique increased overall from 41% to 51%. Democrats moved from 52% to 63%; independents moved from 52% to 58% and Republicans from 26% to 34% (the latter change being marginally significant).

**Proportional Representation**

Another electoral innovation for US elections, proportional representation (PR) received significantly increased support after deliberation. However, the support consistently fell short of the majorities achieved by Ranked Choice Voting. Overall support for PR for electing the US Congress went from 30% to 43%, a gain of 13 points (Q17). Democrats supported it to some degree both before and after (ending at 43%), but Republicans increased their support with deliberation from 18% to 32%, a significant gain of 14 points. In the case of PR for state legislatures, overall support increased significantly with deliberation by 16 points up to 46%, with Republicans increasing by 19 points from 21% to 36% (Q19). Support for PR in City and county councils increased overall by 14 points, from 30 to 44%, while Republican support also increased significantly by 15 points from 21% to 36% (Q19). The arguments for PR seemed to have had significant cross-party appeal, but not quite to the extent that Ranked Choice Voting did.

**Primary System Reform**

Two proposals for replacing partisan primaries with non-partisan ones both received majority support after deliberation. “Instead of party primaries, hold one nonpartisan primary election in which candidates from all parties and independents run against one another. Then have the top two vote-getters in the primary election contest in the general election, no matter their party affiliation (as is now done in two U.S. states)" (Q11). This “top two” proposal for replacing party-based primaries (Q11) went from 43% to 51% in overall support. Democrats went from 49% to 58%, Independents from 48% to 50% and Republicans from 37% to 45%.
The “top four or top five” proposal combined with Ranked Choice Voting also got majority support overall, with a significant rise from 44% to 53% (Q12). Democrats went from 59% to 63%, Independents went from 40% to 58% (a significant rise of 18 points) and Republicans went from 30% to 43%.

**Campaign Finance**

There was super-majority support for disclosure of large donors. The proposal “Require independent organizations such as PACs purchasing election campaign ads to disclose their top donors and officials” (Q68) rose significantly from 69% to 79%. Democrats, Independents and Republicans all rose significantly in their support for this reform (Democrats to 85%, Independents to 74% and Republicans to 76%). Similar overwhelming support applied to “Require all organizations that make election campaign expenditures to disclose their donors (over a certain minimum level)” (Q69). Overall, this proposal increased significantly from 71% to 81%, with Democrats basically unchanged at 84%, Independents increasing significantly from 54% to 76% and Republicans rising significantly from 65% to 81%.

There was also super-majority interest in closing loopholes for foreign money. Support for the proposal to “Close loopholes to prevent foreign-controlled entities from making campaign contributions or election expenditures, including advertisements regarding local measures” (Q70) increased significantly from 79% to 86%, with Democrats rising significantly from 85% to 88%, Independents rising significantly from 67% to 78% and Republicans rising significantly 81% to 90%.

By contrast, proposals for using public funds for campaign finance, either through “democracy vouchers” (Q63), or matching small donor contributions (Q64), attracted little support. Both before and after deliberation there was majority support for the proposition that “public funds should not be used to finance elections” (Q65). Overall agreement with this proposition went from 54% to 61% with Democrats moving from 41% to 53%, Independents moving down slightly from 59% to 54% and Republicans increasing from 68% to 72%.

**Supreme Court Reform**

On reform of the Supreme Court, support for the proposal to “Require members of the Supreme Court to comply with the same ethical standards that apply to other federal judges” (Q71) started with super-majority support at 76% and increased significantly to 88%, with support from Democrats, Republicans and Independents all rising significantly to comparable levels. There was ultimately majority support for the proposal for staggered terms of 18 years for new Justices: “Establish through federal legislation eighteen-year terms for new Supreme Court justices, with appointments staggered such that one nomination comes up during each two-year term of Congress. Temporarily expand the size of the Supreme Court so that each president will appoint a new Supreme Court justice in the first and third years of their presidency” (Q71). Support rose significantly from 38% to 55% overall. Support from Democrats rose significantly from 58% to 72%, support from Independents rose from 37% to 57% (a significant increase of 20 points) while support from Republicans rose significantly and nearly as much from 19% to 36%.

There was also majority support after deliberation for a more conservative proposal: “Adopt a constitutional amendment to keep the U.S. Supreme Court at the current size of nine members” (Q72). Overall support increased from 36% to 51%, with Democrats increasing from 16% to 34% and Republicans increasing from 59% to 72%.
Electoral College Reform

While only 29% of the participants supported keeping “the current system of electing the president through the Electoral College” (Q28), only one of several proposals for an alternative received majority support after deliberation: “Amend the constitution to replace the Electoral College with a national popular vote, in which the presidential candidate that receives the most votes nationally is elected (regardless of whether that candidate wins a majority” (Q24). This proposal went from 51% to 57% in overall support after deliberation. Democrats went from 69% to 76%, Independents went from 51% to 55%, while Republican support remained modest, going from 33% to 38%.

Wide partisan gaps persisted on some related items. Amending the Constitution “to replace the Electoral College and use Ranked Choice Voting applied to the national popular vote to elect the president” reached 48% (61% D, 27% R) (Q25). “Use Ranked Choice Voting within each state to determine the winner of the state’s electoral votes” (Q26) rose significantly from 38% to 47% overall (55% D, 26% R). “In each state distribute the electoral votes to the top two presidential candidates based on the fraction of the vote they win in that state. This would require a constitutional amendment and it would be applied nationally. This is a “fractional proportional” reform of the Electoral College” (Q 26B). This proposal rose significantly overall but only from 21% to 34%. Lastly, the National Interstate Popular Vote Compact (Q29) received only 29% support after deliberation.

The lowest level of support for Electoral College reform, shared by all the parties, was for a proposal embodying the so-called “Independent State Legislature” theory: “Have each state legislature award the state’s electoral votes for the presidential candidate it prefers, regardless of the popular vote in that state” Q 27). This barely achieved 12% support across the board.

Support for Civic Education and Deliberation

The deliberations about political reform increased support for civic education. This proposal: “Increase state and local funding for civic education in the schools, in order to promote knowledge and understanding of democracy as a system of government and of the American constitutional system” (Q74), rose significantly from 67% to 77% in support overall. Republicans increased their support significantly from 61% to 73%.

The discussions also increased support for spreading the experience of deliberation. “Promote opportunities for people of diverse views and backgrounds (including high school and college students) to deliberate with one another on issues confronting their communities and the country at large.” Increased significantly from 63% to 81%, a gain of 18 points overall. Democrats increased from 79% to 86%, Independents from 54% to 65% and Republicans increased even more, from 52% to 82%, an extraordinary gain of 30 points (Q75).

Increased Efficacy and Mutual Respect

The experience of deliberation also increased political efficacy and mutual respect. Those agreeing with this measure of (internal) political efficacy “I have opinions about politics that are worth listening to” (PE4) increased significantly from 64% to 75% with Democrats, Independents and Republicans all experiencing similar gains.

When asked about those with whom they strongly disagree, there were similar gains in “I respect their point of view though it is different from mine” (PE 10). Overall, this moved significantly from 57% before deliberation
to 75% after, with Democrats, Independents and Republicans all experiencing similar gains. A similar pattern held for “I would be willing to compromise to find a solution we can both support” (PE12). This went up significantly from 61% to 76% with similar gains for Democrats, Independents and Republicans.

**Evaluations**

At the end of the deliberations, the participants were asked a series of evaluation questions. 89% thought the small group discussions were valuable, 80% thought the briefing materials were valuable, 82% had that view of the plenary sessions and 94% thought the event as whole was valuable. 91% agreed that “the discussion platform provided the opportunity for everyone to participate in the discussion” and 83% thought “the discussion platform tried to make sure that opposing arguments were considered.” 78% agreed that “the members of my group participated relatively equally in the discussions.” Lastly, 79% agreed with this assessment “I learned a lot about people very different from me—about what they and their lives are like.” These evaluations of the online process with the Automated Deliberation Platform are very comparable to the evaluations we receive with the same questions from face-to-face deliberations with human moderators.

**Knowledge Gain**

A battery of nine knowledge questions was asked before and after deliberation. These showed a significant knowledge gain of 11 points overall. Table with specific results is listed below.

**Broader Implication for Democracy**

We suggest that the participants’ very positive evaluations of the deliberative process, their consistent gains in political knowledge, and their noteworthy gains (across partisan identification) in internal efficacy and mutual respect after deliberation, help to explain the dramatic and surprising improvements we observed in satisfaction with the way democracy is working in the US. Many Americans feel marginalized from politics, that their voice is not heard and can make no difference. But the process of deliberation on these issues with their fellow citizens left them feeling more positively about American democracy. The percent satisfied with American democracy increased two-thirds after deliberation, from a very low 27% to 45%, somewhat more in line with European democracies. The most astonishing increase was among Republicans, whose satisfaction with American democracy more than doubled, from 19 to 50%.

There were also other signs of depolarization. The difference between Democrats and Republicans in satisfaction with democracy declined from 15 percentage points to 4, and the difference in concern about how we conduct elections declined from 27 to 17 points. Democrats and Republicans remained fairly far apart in their receptiveness to different electoral system reforms like Ranked Choice Voting and Proportional Representation, but members of both parties increased their support for these proposals through deliberation. Similarly, Republicans were much more wary of reforms to make it easier to register and vote, but to the extent they changed their views, it was typically in the same direction as Democrats. And on some non-partisan reforms, supporters of the two parties were more closely aligned throughout, for example with making the Secretary of State position overseeing elections a professional rather than elected one, requiring Supreme Court justices to comply with ethical standards for federal judges, and maintain or imposing requirements for transparency in the source of campaign contributions. On the proposal for independent
commissions to redraw electoral district boundaries, the gap in support between Democrats and Republicans narrowed from 26 to 16 points.

Numerous proposals, such as raising the limits on campaign contributions, drew little support from members of either party, both before and after deliberation. Supporters of both parties also showed little enthusiasm for public funding schemes like vouchers for voters to contribute to campaigns, though Democrats were more supportive than Republicans. On all these issues (including the rejection of compulsory voting), Republicans and Democrats were not much divided.

Of the principal proposals for electoral reform in the United States, the type of reform that drew the most support (consistently in all its possible manifestations) was Ranked Choice Voting. After deliberating, majorities supported virtually every proposed application of this reform. While Republicans did not offer majority support, substantial minorities of Republicans (a third or more) also supported RCV. The generic proposal for Final Four or Five voting—a non-partisan primary in which the top four or five finishers advance to a general election using RCV—finished with 53% overall support, and after deliberating Republicans increased their support from 32 to 43%. This appears to be the electoral system reform to which Republicans are most open.

The Deliberative Democracy Lab

The Deliberative Democracy Lab at Stanford University is housed within the Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law, part of the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies. DDL is devoted to research about democracy and public opinion obtained through Deliberative Polling®. The method of Deliberative Polling® has been used in over 50 countries and jurisdictions around the world in over 120 projects, at varying levels of government and society. Professor James Fishkin is the Director and Dr Alice Siu is the Associate Director.