

Acceptance speech

18 June 2026

Kathleen Cagney, Director of **The University of Michigan Institute for Social Research (ISR)**, on behalf of the awardee organization in the Social Sciences category (18th edition)

More than 75 years ago, two University of Michigan researchers asked what seemed like a simple question: who would win the 1948 presidential election? The answer researchers Angus Campbell and Robert Kahn found challenged the conventional wisdom of the day. Nearly everyone expected Thomas Dewey to defeat Harry Truman, but their data suggested otherwise. Truman won. And that moment helped demonstrate the power of rigorous social science, which is not simply to describe the world, but to predict and reveal the realities we cannot yet see.

It is in that spirit that I am honored to accept the Frontiers of Knowledge Award on behalf of the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research. We are deeply grateful to the Foundation, to the award committee, and to all those who have recognized ISR's contributions to the empirical study of social life. We are also pleased to share this award with our colleagues at NORC at the University of Chicago. We are both committed to producing evidence that deepens our understanding of social, economic, and political circumstances.

This award is meaningful because it recognizes our commitment to evidence-based science and methodological rigor in service to the public. From its inception, ISR was built to span boundaries among disciplines, and between the academy and the public. We study the questions that shape people's lives: How healthy will we be as we age? Why do voters make the choices they do? What makes communities thrive? These questions are deeply personal, but they are also profoundly social.

Through long-running studies such as the Health and Retirement Study, the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, Monitoring the Future, the American

National Election Studies, and the Surveys of Consumers, ISR has helped advance social science and inform public policy.

ISR was designed to be nimble. Researchers have a high degree of independence, initiating and shaping projects from proposal to final report. Research programs at ISR range from individual scholarly efforts to large interdisciplinary research programs with national and international field operations. What unites these efforts is a commitment to addressing evolving scientific questions with theoretical depth and empirical rigor.

Five separate but interdependent research centers make up ISR. Each one has a distinct focus and set of capabilities.

- The **Survey Research Center**, our first and largest center, develops and uses scientific sample surveys to analyze social change.
- The **Research Center for Group Dynamics** gives special attention to group processes, social cognition, and intergroup relations.
- The **Center for Political Studies** examines the integrity of democratic institutions, the role of media in society and government, and citizens' perception of information and truthfulness in civil discourse.
- The **Population Studies Center** conducts population research, and is home to a large training program for both predoctoral and postdoctoral scholars.
- The **Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research** is home to a vast archive of digital social science data, preserving and disseminating research data files and training generations of researchers in quantitative methods.

Social science requires durable infrastructure. Our faculty have built the capacity to survey, experiment, and conduct observational measurements at scale. That investment has enabled ISR to become a home for empirical social scientists from around the world.

ISR's achievements have been made possible by generations of faculty, staff, students, interviewers, collaborators, funders, and study participants. I want to especially acknowledge those participants. Every dataset begins with a person: a retiree answering questions about his health and financial security, a teenager reflecting on his aspirations, or a voter describing hopes and frustrations with her government. Across decades, millions of people have entrusted us with information about their lives. They are the true foundation of social science and we are grateful for their trust.

Today, social science stands at an inflection point. Response rates are declining. Public trust in institutions is under strain. New technologies are reshaping how information is created, shared, and consumed. Yet these challenges are accompanied by new possibilities emerging from administrative data, digital traces, biomarkers, mobile measurement, and, critically, artificial intelligence. ISR is looking to the future and building an integrated data ecosystem that combines surveys with new forms of measurement and new data sources. And as data become more complex, our task is to build a sustainable body of research with a commitment to transparency, replicability, and equitable access.

We often describe our work as measuring society. But measurement is only the beginning. The ultimate purpose of social science is understanding: helping communities make better decisions, helping institutions serve people more effectively, and helping societies navigate uncertainty with evidence rather than assumption.

On behalf of the Institute for Social Research, I accept this award with gratitude. It honors generations of those who committed their time and expertise to finding answers that expand the frontiers of our knowledge. We receive it as recognition of past contributions, but also as a charge for the future: to continue producing trustworthy evidence, advancing social science methods, and serving the public good.