Welcome back to another episode of Bush School Uncorked. Today we are actually maybe sadly not at Uncorked but we found us a nice space to chat today. Today we're going to talk a little bit about democracy. We're recording this the day after the US midterms when everyone was participating in democracy. We're going to talk a little bit about that at the end of the episode today. We have an expert with us on democracy, Jessica Gottlieb. We're going to talk with her. I'm going to let her introduce herself and our other cohost is with us today, might everyone say hello. Then we'll have a nice conversation with Jessica and then shift to a broader conversation about the elections.

Great, thank you, Justin. I'm Jessica Gottlieb. I'm an assistant professor at the Bush School in the international affairs department. I've been here for about six years. What else do you want to know?

I think you got here one year before me, is that right?

Yeah.

Yeah. No, we'll talk a little bit more about what your research is and what you do but thanks for joining us today.

I'm Gregory Gause.

Greg's back.

The department head ...

My boss.

Of the department of international affairs at the Bush School of Government, welcome back faithful podcast listeners. Sorry, we're not at downtown Uncorked, I know that everyone likes to imagine us sitting at a bar having these conversations but it's going to be just as interesting sitting here in the [inaudible 00:01:34] conference room at the Bush School itself.

Yeah, we're not any shortage of interesting topics today I don't think.

That's for sure.

Well let's start with diving into some research on democracy. There's, thought about different ways to frame this but I think we'll just dive into what Jessica does. Maybe you could start by telling us a little bit about what type of work you do on democracy, how you approach it as a question and then I want to talk about a couple of your recent works in the international context and then some very recent work you've done that I think is really fascinating.

Sure, the main question that fascinates me, that gets me up in the morning is how democracy works or as it were doesn't work in low income country settings. I think we know more at least about how democracy works in really old countries, really old democracies like our own and like those in western Europe. We know a lot less about how democracy is going to go in places that have very recently democratized. A lot of the countries that I focus on are in Africa and Francophone Africa in particular because I happen to speak French and so that's my comparative advantage, there happens to be a lot less research on those countries because of the language barrier. Also those are some of the democracies, prominent democracies on the African continent.

I've taken my research questions there. People often ask me why do you study Africa when you could be studying democracy at home. At least when I started studying these questions I found them to be a lot more interesting in Africa where things were moving quickly and it felt like there was a lot more room for change. Also the research questions were much bigger. People have been studying American democracy for so long that it felt like some of the questions were getting quite minute and less important. However, that is now all changing given the big transitions and turbulence, chaos that we've seen in our democratic system. Actually for the first time I've been able to take lessons from what I've learned in the African context back to the American context. I'll start out by talking about some of the research I've done overseas but then as you mentioned we'll get to some of the, some of how that connects back to how I've been thinking about democracy in my own country.

It's interesting to think about the just, there were points in not too recent past where we were trying to export democracy. Then now some of these [inaudible 00:04:18] about democracy we need to make sure we're applying back home. I think the just approach to your research is really interesting to think about how poor, new formed maybe constitutional democracies function. This would've been really useful for us as we tried to spread democracy when we were trying to do that, right. We have some really clear events of us trying to do that and it not going so well. The classic example and one of the first I learned about was from our former Dean Ryan Crocker and some of the ways in which we tried to do or didn't try to do state building in Iraq.

This stuff has real, these questions have real impacts for not just what it means for our own democracy but how other countries implement it, how they grow into a full functioning democracy, how they go about protecting their minority rights in a constitutional democracy. These are some really I think important questions. That's been one of the most fun things so far about doing these interviews is finding out what colleagues are doing. It's really cool to see some of your work. What questions have you more specifically looked at? What aspects of improving democracy or thinking about democracy, I mean I know you're an empiricist so you use data to test hypotheses. How do you in your research, how have you thought about democracy and then what variables have you used to see how they influence democracy?

Sure, so there's a couple of constraints to full fledged functioning democracy that I find are prevalent in particularly low income and new democracies and I'll enumerate those and then I'll talk about how I've done some research to address them. A big constraint is a lack of information. Voters are expected to make informed decisions about the candidates that are presenting in an election, they have to be informed about what those candidates are doing, how they're different from one another and also how those candidates are doing once in office. We know that information asymmetries or the candidates or parties having a lot more information than the voters is a big problem. That's purposeful that candidates and politicians like for that asymmetry to exist so that they can do more of what they want and less of what the voters want. That's constraint number one. That's mostly what I'll be talking about in the research that I've done.

Another constraint is that people still feel, people have very strong informal networks that they rely on for getting credit, getting loans, getting help with health concerns or schooling, just everyday life because the state has been absent for millennia so they have to rely on each other. These very strong social informal bonds form. We can't ignore those when we start to think about having a formal system of governance put on top of that. What happens generally is that people start to rely on, even when democracy comes, people start to rely on their informal networks to understand what's best for them in the electoral context.

You start getting people voting along these informal lines. We often call them patron client relationships that people are relying on patrons for access to healthcare and goods in exchange for protection. That means that patrons can also influence who you vote for. Instead of voting along a programmatic line like should there be more or less redistribution in this country that we see most people voting along these informal lines such as who is my patron or within my ethnic group who is the leader that I should be relying on. I have to continue to rely on them to survive in this very low income context. That's another constraint that often democratic cleavages in the west are along ideological or programmatic lines such as how much taxes should be implemented or whether it's a big government or small government and what else, how charter school versus not ...

When to rely on the private sector versus when government should provide things ....

Exactly.

Relatively loose immigration laws, relatively tight immigrations laws.

Exactly but in most of the campaigns that you see in these new democracies those just aren't the debates on the table. It's when you look at most candidates, they look almost exactly the same on these ideological issues. They're all spouting the same things about how they're going to develop and how they're not going to be corrupt and what makes someone vote for one over the other is often these informal ties to their leaders.

Which I think this comes up, actually I know it does because I looked at the papers, this has a lot to do then with limits of access to information that you may have based on time or quality information or whatever, what's available to you and also what groups you identify with. These informal networks I imagine are built a large part around how your own social identity and how you view yourself. Some of these common ones that we might think of that you mentioned of, that you mentioned were things like your ethnicity, things like maybe the class of people you're a part of, all of those things. In these developing democracies in low income places, it's often the case that the what's really being discussed or debated isn't really the policy proposals. They're often very similar and very like claiming to be not corrupt and these kind of broad strokes. The way they appeal to people is appealing to their social identities or their culture or some identifying characteristics about them and their networks.

Right, that's not, it's not stupid.

Yeah.

People are not irrational. This is almost always the best strategy that these voters have that this is the best way they can guarantee themselves at least something and that a lot of times they're able to hold these patrons accountable to something, to provide, maybe not to providing them with universal healthcare but at least to providing their village with some wells or some locally excludable targeted goods that they get because they voted in large part for their patron and the neighboring village didn't. It's a smart strategy for voters. There's been one researcher who did, who made a really salient point about why we see so much of this strategy going on in new democracies.

It's because when you think about it, why do we trust our parties when they make programmatic promises, when they say when we get into office we're going to start implementing better immigration policies, better tax policies. It's because they have a track record. They have a reputation. They also have a party. The party is going to discipline them. In new democracies there are a, no parties. There's not a history of parties when you move from an autocratic state to a not autocratic state. There aren't those organizations already in place. Also there are no reputations. Nobody can say well look, I have this credible history of following through on my promises. This is about all that voters can hold leaders accountable to in new democracies. A big question then is how does it shift, how does it shift to a more programmatic democratic ...

I guess one of the ways of thinking about that is what you've, at least some of the questions that you ask which is we can't really do a whole lot about these informal networks. Maybe we can do something about the information piece of this. Tell me a little bit about what you found with what we can or what has been done or some of the experiments to improve accountability of the elected officials based on information, since the informal network is going to be a little harder I think to invade or to have, make some changes ...

Yeah, especially because they're providing people with something that they can't provide a substitute for unless the state all of a sudden grows another arm and a leg, right. Information is manipulatable but it's especially useful when it's true, right. It's not ...

I love that characterization of information.

It's neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition but it does help if it's true.

It's not, I mean there have been some hypothetical information experiments that people have done in these countries to see what if there were a candidate that were really high performing, would people vote for them. The answer is usually yes. When you're doing a field experiment or trying to manipulate something in the real world, introducing false information is not ethical but it also probably isn't going to have the impact you're hoping because voters know that, they can see that their welfare has not improved as a result of that politician. That is a hard thing to do well. One of the observations that I made early on in my fieldwork, in my dissertation actually was that one information asymmetry that was under explored was not how well the politicians were doing in office, it felt like voters kind of knew what was going on, maybe not, maybe they didn't have the budgets to check whether they were being spent correctly.

They knew whether their life was better than it was before. What I found the big information asymmetry was what voters though the government could do or was supposed to do. Imagine a country in which for a really long time you're living in a rural periphery and the state, the non democratic state completely ignores you because you're peasants and you don't have enough collective action to threaten sanctions on the government. You're not going to rebel anytime soon so the government leaves you alone. People expect that the government has nothing for them and is not going to do anything for them.

Then the capital institutes a democracy and all of a sudden you have an elected official sitting at your outpost instead of a prefect of the old autocratic regime. Now you're supposed to be holding this elected official accountable for something but your expectation is that that politician is still not going to do anything for you. Why would you all of a sudden expect because of this so called democracy in the capital that they're going to start doing things on your behalf. People are voting with the expectation that the politician is going to do almost nothing. If they do anything, you're like great they've built a toilet and now they're happy. It's again, it's not stupid it's because this is what their lived experience tells them is reasonable. One of the information asymmetries I thought we could reasonably close, fill that gap is to help voters understand what their new local councils, their democratically elected local councils were capable of, what their budgets look like, what the roles and responsibilities that those local councils were. This is information that they did not have. It's also information that the local councils didn't want them to have because they were doing fine on their own.

Being held less accountable.

Exactly. That was my first big foray into information experiments was to provide a, in the form a civic education program information about just that, taking actual budget numbers from local councils and saying this is what they have and what does that mean in real terms, how many wells could that build, how many schools and then also giving people an idea about what other councilors could actually do with that. There's two ways to raise expectations. You can either help people have a reference point, a benchmark against what other people are doing or you could set a standard and say this is the standard and are people meeting the standard. I think both were important in this case, setting the standard, this is what they're able to do but then also saying there are neighboring council members who are doing a much better job than yours. That kind of competitive spirit did a lot to activate voters' imaginations and to see yeah it is feasible in this context to have higher expectations of our elected officials. That program actually worked to change the way that voters thought about disciplining politicians. They were willing to sanction them for more misbehavior than they had been before. They also participated more in town hall meetings following the civic education program. This is in Mali, I forgot to say the country.

This is so cool. I have to, I mean not to just be heaping praise on you but I really like the instances where you take some economic assumptions and you're introducing some of the best of what we know about psychology or behavioral economics and actually testing it out based on what we expect those incentives to be, taking these known kind of irrational or known biased ways of thinking about things. I really like this tapping into what people should expect and then deviations from that helping improve what their expectations are from democracy. I think that's really cool. Across the two setting the standard and the reference point, it used to one thing that really activated the respondents was knowing that the people in near communities had been performing in a certain way. Is the reference point stronger? Is the effect of the reference point ...

I think benchmarking yeah or yardstick voting when you're comparing to what else is going on elsewhere I think that is a very strong incentive in part because it's one thing to say this is possible and this is the standard but it's another thing to say it's actually happened somewhere else that looks like your community.

That's really cool. I want just to keep on moving, for the purposes of time, you have a newer paper out that does some of this as well, takes these psychological concepts and looks at them in this realm. This one is also an international case to the US and it deals with the information question again and motivated reasoning.

Okay, before we get to that question I'm going to set up the project because the motivated reasoning finding was a bit of a surprise for us. We didn't set out to find that particular finding. We were excited when we were able to say something interesting along those lines. The project was trying to take the, some of the intuitions from this Mali piece and push it a little further. One question that I posed earlier on in our conversation is how do voters that tend to vote along clientelistic lines switch to voting along more programmatic lines. That was one of the questions we were asking in this piece. We took it to a country where we know voters do vote along clientelistic lines and that is Benin. Benin has been described as a very clientelistic democracy and a lot of people use their ethnic identity as a sort of signal for which is the in group I should be electing to office. We were doing this right before a legislative election. The legislature, it's interesting because they are not in power to make targeted decisions to benefit just their constituencies. The legislature in Benin is only in power to make ...

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... the Legislature in Benin is only in power to make national laws. And so, anything that they do for their constituency only is pretty much informal, and on the this is not among your formal responsibilities. But they still do that. They still do that because that's the way that these institutions tend to work, de facto, even though that's not how they're supposed to work de jure.

So, we thought that was an interesting opportunity to separate out the legislators who were doing their de jure job better, which is showing up at the legislature, passing laws, going to their committees, being active members of the plenary sessions, rather than those legislators who are, instead, you know, not going to the plenary sessions and instead going back to their home communities and promising a bunch of stuff. Stuff that would probably be from money that was maybe illegally or corruptly attained. Because that's how this stuff works. You get into the legislature so you have access to this big pot of money, and then you use it through these sort of informal channels to benefit your constituents.

So, we constructed an information index, like a score card, essentially, about how different incumbent legislators had been doing on our legislative performance index, which accounts for this, you know, attendance, passing laws, active, questioning, et cetera. And we provided this information to the voters right before the legislative elections. And our hypothesis was that if the going thing to do is to vote along clientelistic lines, this kind of information should make no impact on people's voting decisions, because they know that that's not what's going to benefit them in the long term. They know that what's going to benefit them is having a highly active clientelistic legislator, not having a high-performing legislative legislator. Right?

So, we thought, is there any way that a voter might say, "Actually, I'm going to go ahead and vote for that high-performing legislative legislator instead." And we thought under these conditions, it might be worth it. Under the conditions that A, they see the value of a high-performing legislator. They see that, "Oh, our legislature has actually been talking about this national health insurance policy for a long time, but they haven't gotten it passed." Why? Because nobody's asking them where it's gone. So, introducing true information about what could be done if legislators did a better job. And, two, if enough of the constituency all shifted to vote along those lines, because if you're the only little community, or you're the only voter to shift to voting along those lines, not only are you not going to get your guy elected, but you'll probably be punished by the guy who does get elected, who got elected along clientelistic lines.

Working on some game theory. I like this. Yeah.

So, this is a coordination game.

Yeah.

You only want to do it if there's enough other people doing it.

So, in this project, we randomized both whether the individuals were getting information about this, we called it "Salience," whether or not legislative performance was salient for your well-being. But more importantly, we randomized the dosage. How high a proportion of your constituency is getting this information? So, in some communities, we said, "You are the only village in this constituency that's getting this information." But in other constituencies, we said, "You are among a quarter of all villages in this constituency who's getting this information." And that was true.

And we found, lo and behold, that this information did not change the behavior in the low-dosage places, but it did change behavior in the high-dosage places. It encouraged people to vote for the high-performing legislators on our legislative index. So, it seemed to shift, not only people's priors about their performance, but also people's priors about which dimension they should be voting on, no longer the clientelistic dimension, but the legislative performance.

It activates a different frame for making the decision?

But also, it gives them the assurance that enough other people are going to do it.

So, they won't be punished.

So, they won't be punished and that they have a chance of getting this guy in office.

So, it's really not framing, it's irrational expectation that moving this way is going to improve your-

Yeah, it's all about second order beliefs about who else is going to do it because if not enough people do it, it's not-

Why bother? Yeah.

Yeah.

So, that was the first question we were asking in that project and one that I was excited about because I think that related to some of my new work, which is about why in these low income democracies are states not developing capacity more quickly? And I think that state capacity is a big problem for the transition to programmatic politics because people are not going to value universalistic programs if the state is incapable of providing them.

Yeah.

And so, we see these weak states that (A) are weak, but (B) do not seem to be investing in growing their capacity quickly and one possibility is that they do not wish to invest in growing their capacity quickly because that's going to mobilize voters who have a lot more demands to make on them and I've been thinking about why this may not have applied to older democracies, such as our own and this goes back to early literature, canonical literature and political science, which talks about what motivated states to invest in their physical and bureaucratic capacity and it was war.

Right.

So, in Europe, why did states form? Chile says because they-

To fight wars.

They want to be able to protect themselves from their neighbors or have imperial goals and so, they need to invest in physical capacity so that they can extract revenue in order to build their armies. They need to invest in state capacities so that they can provide services like education and health so that they have a healthy, literate army that's able to wage war better than the next guy.

And they can extract man power to build an army.

Exactly. So, these are all reasons that early states in the west and us as well invested in physical and bureaucratic capacity that had nothing to do with or might have overcome these disincentives that you might face in a democracy today, but those incentives are absent in all young democracies today as we live in an international system that doesn't permit states, interstate war or-

Or at least some states are not permitted to engage in interstate, man, what a potential perverse impact of lowering interstate-

Is the inability to grow functioning state capacity within constitutional democracies.

Yeah. There's been some really interesting new work that's shown that even in trust state conflict has influenced local variation in physical capacity and bureaucratic capacity so that when there was more in trust state conflict and new state formation, those places were the ones that ended up being ahead of the curb in terms of physical and state capacity, yeah.

When did the United States start to collect an income tax? Briefly during the civil war.

Yep.

Well, then all the expansion and social programs right around World War Two-

We put it in another income tax during World War One and it was declared unconstitutional and you had to have a constitutional amendment to have a federal income tax, but it comes from war. It comes from war making.

Yep.

So, where does this take us with some of your, yeah, some of the newest work?

So, one of the side projects or additional findings we had from this work in Benin is the one about ethnicity.

So, we thought that ethnicity would have an affect on the way that the information was going to lead to differential voting behavior and we proposed some ways in which that might work and people have thought for a long time that ethnicity would influence people's take up of information, but that could be consistent with a bunch of different theories about how identity affects information and the one that we found was the best match for what actually happened in our setting is called motivated reasoning.

So, the way that this works or the way that our experiment turned out is that people were getting information about their incumbent and just because of natural variation in the population, sometimes the incumbent was a coethnic and sometimes that incumbent was a non-coethnic of the individual and we found that among the individuals who are coethnics who received positive information, positive legislative information about their incumbent, they reacted to the information and they acted differently than the people in the controlled group who did not, the coethnics of the controlled people who did not get that information.

So, information worked when it was positive about a coethnic.

And that information is about performance, not about delivering the goods.

Exactly. That was about how often you were in legislature.

So, you were potentially already primed to think favorably about this person. So, hearing favorable information makes you act a certain way and the reverse was true as well.

So, when you got negative information about a non-coethnic, negative performance information about a non-coethnic, you were less likely to vote for that incumbent than the counterfactual person in the control group.

However, if you're a coethnic and you get negative legislative performance information, you are not any different than the people who did not get that information.

So, information in our story only worked when the information was consistent with the person's social identity. When the social identity of the person already led them to think favorably or unfavorably about the incumbent politician and it turns out that the psychology literature has a word for that and that's motivated reasoning and the American Politics Literature has been talking about partisan motivated reasoning for a long time, in which you also might have heard to it referred to as confirmation bias, but something about your priors will lead you to take up or not take up information differentially, however-

But in American politics, would that motivation be your partisan leaning as opposed to say your ethnic affiliation?

Yes, but that is where I think the work that I have been doing in Africa has really interesting lessons for what's going on in the U.S.

So, a deeper way of thinking about motivated reasoning and what it's actually doing psychologically is that if you think about an individual receiving some information, they might have two goals in taking up that information.

One goals is to maximize the accuracy with which they know the thing that information is about. So, we want to be accurate. That makes us feel good to have true knowledge.

The second is that we want to maximize our social identity. We want to make ourselves feel good and that's much more of an emotional reaction, but we all have social identities that hit very close to home and when they're activated or when you say something positive about that identity, you feel good and when you say something negative about that identity, you feel bad.

So, there are two things that are pushing, sometimes, in opposite directions when you receive information and sometimes they're aligned and that's the case of getting good legislative performance information about a coethnic is that those two goals are aligned and so, you're going to do the thing that the information implies or you're going to take up that information, but sometimes they're not aligned.

When you get information about your co-partisan that says something negative about what that co-partisan did that makes you feel bad. So, you may or may not take it up and whether or not you do has to do with how strong your attachment is to that social identity.

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Right?

So, the way that we've been talking about partisan motivated reasoning in the U.S., partisanship was thought of as this difference in ideology, that people who are on the right tend to have more conservative beliefs. They like small government. They want lower taxes, etc. People on the left tend to like the opposite, but what we're seeing in the U.S. today is a detachment of these issues and ideologies from the social partisan identification and there was this great piece by [Louianna 00:34:48] Mason in AJPS in the last few years where she looked at the-

That's the American Journal of Political Science.

Where she looked at the, ANES, the American National Election Survey-

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

And showed that, in fact there had been a debate in the literature. Is America becoming more or less polarized? And there was a debate. People said more, some people said less and she said, "Well, that's because we're talking about two different kinds of polarization." There's social partisan polarization and there's issue polarization and she said, "America has never been more unified on the issues. People's ideas about issues have never been more moderated or close together on both sides of the aisle."

By contrast, people have never been more socially polarized and so, this is where I start to think that thinking about your social or ethnic identity as doing a lot of work in moderating your information take up, it really applies to what's going on in the U.S. right now because people are thinking not necessarily about what the candidates are espousing in terms of their ideology, they're thinking about how well that candidate is performing as a member of one's tribe and we have become very tribal and figuring out a way to tamp down the amount of work that social identification is doing in favor of the work that the accuracy goal is doing is one hope for moderating our political beliefs and discussions.

So, when you're saying that, I was chuckling to myself that what you should call it is the Facebook effect.

I was just thinking Fake news, the fake news effect.

What I think is what's nuanced about it from what I noticed with my own interactions talking about public issues on Facebook is that everyone and in some ways myself included, do exactly that and what I mean by that, it's not the coethnicity as much it is the coparty or the co-tribe, however you defined it and when something positive comes out that represents your tribe, there's some evidence for something positive, people post that, right? And then when there's something negative about the other side, the other tribe, people post that.

What you see very little of in that sphere is people posting negative information about their tribe or positive things about the other tribe and it actually comes up in comments where people are having back and forth these conversations, "You never do this. You never say anything bad about this side."

And it's just interesting to me as you were laying out the theoretical reasoning behind it that just from anecdotally definitely plays out in the Facebook sphere and I'm sure people are already looking at that, but that would be a really interesting application of looking at where people have self-identified what their tribes are and then the types of things that they post. I'm sure you'd be able to see the same structure you would imagine.

Yeah and that's why I started getting more interested in what was going on in our own politics is because I was writing this paper in 2016 while I was listening to the election campaigns and the run up to the presidential elections and I was guilty of doing this exact same thing and noticing it was helpful and that's one project I haven't worked on yet, but we're proposing to do with the same team of people in Benin is to think about things that might help overcome this type of social partisan motivated reasoning and one of the proposed ways is to just make people aware of it because if you notice yourself doing it, you might be more open to changing that behavior that might not be strong enough, that's been found to work in other situations where psychological biases have effects on behavior when you make people aware of their psychological biases.

Sometimes they can have less of an effect, but other types of ideas we've had is priming cross cutting issues.

So, for instance, in other work, a colleague of mine has done work on how to moderate. There's also differential coethnic trust in Africa that the people tend to trust their coethnics more than they would trust a non-coethnic and a colleague of mine, Amanda Robinson, has done work on what might mitigate that benefit that coethnics have in working with other coethnics and she founds that priming nationalism was helpful so that if you were primed even with something as simple as a flag or a conversation about your national hymn prior to making an interaction with a non-coethnic that you were more likely to trust them because you are thinking more about the thing that united you than the thing that divided you.

So, that's-

So, Americans, before they go into the voting booth should listen to the national anthem. We should have the national anthem playing on loop at every polling place.

This is a challenge for us in that patriotism has been co-opted by one of the parties as more of a partisan issue.

So, it's hard to think about things that would be neutral and national sports-

The flag? Should you have the flag in every voting booth? In other words, when you go in, you see the flag before you vote.

Depends on if the flag has also been co-opted.

I mean, that would be an interesting discussion in American politics. Has the flag been co-opted in Benin?

I don't know enough about that country's flag. I do know about Molly's Flag.

How about Molly?

Which has a very strong message about unity, but it also has a message about faith and so, one of the, what is it called? Their national motto is one faith, one people, one faith and something else and so, that faith is Islam and 95% of the population is Muslim, but for that 5%-

Yeah. We were saying how about two-face? Yeah.

Would it be good too, thank you so much for sharing some of your work with us. It was fun to read through it and fun to, I've been reading some stuff myself on Economics for the Common Good by Jean Tirole and in it, he lays out exactly some of the new approaches to doing the new types of questions economics is interested in and two of the main themes he identified were information theory and game theory and so, you applied both of them and it was really cool to see the way in which you are applying some of these information concepts and-

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The way in which you are applying some of these information concepts and behavioral concepts to some of these questions, so thanks for sharing with us.

Yeah.

Greg, do you want to broaden this out and will shift to a broader discussion. It is the day following politics ... following politics ... another day following politics. It is the day after election here in the U.S., the 2018 midterms and we are talking about democracy, so ... yeah. We'll take a little pause and we'll be right back.

Welcome back. Instead of giving a bunch of hot takes, which are based largely on what we read in the newspaper this morning or heard on the radio, I thought it might be more interesting to try to play out some of the themes that Jessica's work led us to discuss in the first segment and talk about democratic decay. Her work is on emerging democracies as it were, but we've also seen quite a bit of democratic reversion. We just had Madeleine Albright here at the school yesterday, on election day, talking about her work, her new book on fascism, a warning in which she gives a number of accessible case studies of countries that we thought were on democratic trajectory. Turkey, Hungary, a bunch other places, that have, if you will, reverted or moved toward in a more authoritarian way.

And Jessica I know that you're teaching a Capstone course, which is our second year, second semester course for our Masters in International Affairs students, in which they do a project for a real world client, on issues of democratic decay. How does the democratic decay issue, how did it come out of the work you were doing?

Sure, thanks. So not coincidentally, after the 2016 elections a bunch of political scientists, mostly young professors, got together and decided that they wanted to teach a new course called Democratic Erosion to their students. And the reason for this is that democratic erosion is not, or democratic decay, democratic backsliding it's called by a number of different names, is not something we was young professors were educated about very well in our own training as PHD students. And that's partly because this is a relatively new phenomenon. So when we talk about democratic transitions in and out of democracy, we usually think about coups or civil wars or quick transitions from one to the other. From one regime type to the other.

But this new trend that we're seeing a lot of in some of the cases that are in Madeleine Albright's book, are these examples where democrats who are elected to government, start to undermine their own democratic institutions from the inside. And this is thought to be a phenomenon that's about one or two decades old. So we don't know a lot about it and we thought that we should, given that we were unsure about whether some of what was going on in our own country were signs of this very phenomenon. So these professors got together and said let's make a course about that, not only to teach our students something that's quite salient in today's world and national politics, but also to teach ourselves. And this course is now a collaborative course being taught by over 20 universities in the U.S. and abroad. There's one being taught in the Philippines actually.

One of the cases in Albright's book.

Yep. And we teach a unified syllabus, that is all online at democratic-erosion.com, if you want to go access the syllabus and there's some really great blog posts. One of the things that unifies our course is that students from all over the country and the world now post blogs on current events on the site. And we have some other things on there, such as the data that was generated by our Capstone. So what I decided to do instead of running this as normal course, was to use this as opportunity to reach out to the policy world and see if anything about democratic erosion might be interesting to policy makers, and of course it was. So the democracy human rights and governance center at USAID, essentially they're governance division, has been interested in this phenomenon for many years and ...

And USAID is the United States agency for international development that gives out the foreign aid that the U.S. gives out.

Thanks. Yeah. So we asked them whether they would like us to do some policy research on this topic and they were really excited. They said one of things that was lacking was not theorizing about how and when this happens, but looking at actual data to better understand what it looks like and whether it looks different when it's done in Africa versus when it's done in Western and Eastern Europe.

So indicators of decay.

Yes. Both precursors to decay and indicators of decay itself, and whether the phenomenon looks different and whether it happens differently in different places. So we used, this is a very cool advantage of having all of these courses being taught, we used case studies being written by hundreds of students in these courses across the country and in the Philippines. The Filipino students were actually the best case writers.

That's awesome.

Nothing like living through it.

Trials and ...

They wrote narrative case studies about different cases of erosion and our students at the Bush School coded those case studies to create and event data set. So we have this great data set with about 1000 events that says per each country, per each year, whether there was some indicator of erosion. For instance, whether the president abolished term limits or threw some of the opposition party members in jail, or tamped down on the media, and these are now in a data set coded by country. There are four researchers or policy makers to exploit and now that data's all online on that website I mentioned earlier.

And this year, we have another Capstone in which we're going to have our students use this data to write policy memos that try to better understand what the data can tell us about the patterns of democratic erosion across the world. So, what are the lessons for the U.S.? Well, one of the biggest precursors of democratic erosion is polarization. And my favorite explanation about how polarization leads to democratic erosion is by [Noel Spolick 00:49:07], who's a Yale professor who actually will be visiting [inaudible 00:49:10] on Friday to talk about this new work. So his theory is that what polarization does, is it makes co-partisans of the current government fear the opposition so much, that they're willing to endure a lot more misbehavior by that incumbent government.

So they know that he government is undermining democratic institutions. It's not that it's doing it unwittingly. That they know, but they're willing to make that sacrifice to the norms of their democracy or the democratic institution itself, because they are so afraid of what would happen to them if the other tribe took their reins. And this goes back to what we know about how to make a stable democracy, which is to lower the stakes. That when the stakes get too high, that the opposition is going to come and take them or those in power are going to try to stay there, by any means necessary. And I think that makes a lot of sense. It goes against one of the things Madeleine Albright said yesterday, she quoted Mussolini, in fact, who said "If you pluck a chicken one feather at a time, that's how you get fascism," essentially.

But given what we know polarization, I'm not sure that this chicken is being plucked unwittingly. I think that people know, people see that the president in the U.S. for instance, is making attacks on the media. They know that that's happening. And I think they just don't care or they care more about their tribe holding on to power.

It's not that they don't care necessarily, it's they care more about something else, right. I mean if we look at the quintessential issue of polarization in American History, right, people in slave states were unwilling to respect the election of a president who was vocally and committed to anti-slavery platform. And thus, they left the union and were willing to fight about it. And that's raising the stakes of politics very high. But I wonder how you lower the stakes in politics? Because if you want the state to do more, and we think state capacity is a good thing. We wish these new democracies that you're studying in Africa had greater state capacity so they could provide more to their citizens, not on the basis of patronage or corruption, but on the basis of a programmatic commitment to health care and education and all those things.

Doesn't that raise the stakes of politics?

Well I think that one of the things people are afraid is their whole world changing. And that comes with and from the espousal of fear. And the things that are being espoused that make people afraid, I think in many cases are not true, that people's entire worlds are not going to be turned on their head if some new immigrants come into the country.

So people don't get afraid about marginal economic improvements right?

I don't think so.

That you split the difference on, right. More taxes, less taxes, universal health care versus some kind of employer based that maybe the government than helps you with and if you're old you get Medicaid. So the things that really polarize you are identity issues.

Absolutely.

Some state capacity is kind of irrelevant to some of those identity issues.

I think so.

Which makes right, we've been dealing with the identity issues as humans a lot longer than we've been able to internal intuitions about the modern state. And I think the ... is another kind of game theory problem I think. It's in both ... once we've started going down this path, it's in both parties interest to be bad performers, because you have to believe that the other side is going to be good performers if you choose to be good performers. And so, and particularly when the evidence appears to be that being bad performers works.

Well when you mean bad performers, you don't bad in delivering the [crosstalk 00:53:47]. You mean violating the norms of democratic debate. Right?

Yes. So there's a Winguest paper on exactly this in 1990 about democracy in a divided society, where he says that if society is divided, the only way to get stable democracy is if the leader transgresses on the other side, you commit to hold the leader accountable, because it's very easy for the leader to take sides and divide and conquer. And so there has to be some norm that everybody commits to say, I'm going to sanction the leader with you, even if he's transgressing against you.

Even if the leader is my guy, right?

Right.

And this is presumably what you have constitutions for. But no constitution works without some norms that are not written down in the document. But some understanding about how we're going to play the game.

Right.

And I wonder. I mean one of the things that old political scientists, even older than me, because I'm ancient, but people like, who were writing the '50's and '60's. They bemoan the fact that America didn't have ideological parties, right? We had liberal Republicans and conservative Republicans and we had liberal democrats, but we also had the whole South was democratic and they were pretty conservative and the system down there was based on racial segregation and suppressing African American participation. So you had these ... each party was strange coalition. And a lot of political scientists said well that's bad, because you can't really hold the parties accountable, because they don't have a real program.

Now we're actually getting ideological parties in the United States and the stakes ... people seem to believe that the stakes of politics of increased. And so the polarization increases and you get the greater risk of democratic decay. I don't know how far ... I think people would differ on how far down the road we are on the road to democratic decay. But we know from the kinds of cases that Jessica's classes are looking and other scholars. You know, the big book on this recently was Levitsky and Ziblatt, right? The two Harvard guys. And there's some very accessible things that Levitsky and Ziblatt have written from the research they've done so people can just google Ziblatt. We'll put it up on the page as well.

But I think that that is the question for those of us who care about American politics, is how far down the road have we gone. Are people who don't like Donald Trump exaggerating this because we don't like Donald Trump or what are the indicators. And that ... we're not going to solve that today, that's for sure. But that to me I think is the serious question.

Yeah. Another resource that's interesting to look at is called "Bright Line Watch" and you can also Google that. It's a survey by political scientists of political scientists about these questions that have been done in waves every few months since the election of Trump.

It's a little incestuous, political scientists polling political scientists.

Yeah, but one of the things I like that they've done is they've separated two dimensions. The dimensions of, is this a threat to democracy? So like how much has Trump performed well or poorly on this dimension and how important is that dimension. So it turns out that Trump is performing really poorly on a lot of things that political scientists think are not the highest priority to a sound democracy. But he has not started to attack some of those dimensions that are more foundational to a democracy. And so, I think that's where we need to keep our eye, is once we start seeing those things, it's going to be a lot more problematic.

So do you get polled by Bright Line Watch?

Yes.

So do I.

So do I. We all do.

So all three of us do.

We all do.

So there might be some indoctrinating problem with us discussing the results of this since we all contribute to it.

It is interesting, I tried to, as it's happening in real time and giving all the conversations around it, it does ... sometimes it's hard to see how much of it is rhetoric and how much the rhetoric affected norms and how much of of it is more kind of a long lasting effects, because the norms have changed. One of the interesting cases, just to mention one because it's the state I'm from, is Georgia. I'm talking about whether or not to be concerned about democratic erosion, and here you had all these attempts at suppressing voter turnout, and the person running for office was also the person running the election as the secretary of state. And those types of things are like seem to be real advances on disrupting checks of democratic control. Like the person running the election is also the person running for office and there are not limited accusations, a lot of accusations about voter suppression attempts, to the degree to which the courts stepped in and said you have to quit doing this.

And so, there are ... it's interesting to see, I think, to think about at the national level, what are the concerns and how concerning are they. But even playing out ... when you start looking at the States, I think you really do see some evidence where some of these things at the state level, maybe because there's less accountability or we're paying less attention. But it does seem like things at the state level, I mean, and you saw them in several governor's races, are really exemplifying what we're seeing at the federal level, without less kind of oversight and accountability.

Although in Pennsylvania, you got the supreme court to overturn the very gerrymandered districts there and that's where ...

And that was the state supreme court. Very interesting there. The state supreme court of Pennsylvania actually mandated a redrawing of the districts, which were heavily gerrymandered in favor of the Republicans. But that wasn't federal. It wasn't based on federal, 14th amendment, equal protection or anything like that. It was based on specific clauses of the Pennsylvania state constitution. Which is interesting. This has kind of segue wayed us into hot takes, and we don't have time for this.

Yeah, we don't have time for this.

So I think what we have to do is thank Jessica for this very interesting conversation, maybe Justin you and me at some point in the next day or two, and maybe we can get Anne Bowman, who joined us last week, to sit down and do the hot takes on the election and maybe we can get two postings out of this week's.

That'd be great. Then it's another day or two for news to come in.

Can I make a closing argument?

Yes please do.

Yes please. Jessica, the last word is yours.

So one of the things I've learned from this class, teaching this class and studying this stuff, is the importance of moderation in politics and the importance of talking to people who you don't agree with, because I think it limits this Facebook effect you were talking about earlier. It exposes you to new ideas that you might not have access to otherwise. And it forces you to base your own ideas in fact. It's much harder to defend yourself to someone who disagrees with you, then to someone who agrees with you, and I think we should all challenge ourselves to talk to people who we don't agree with and just surround yourselves by diversity of views.

And that's easier to do here in the Texas than it is to do in a lot of other places, and that's one of the reasons I appreciate being here Mike, and try to put this into practice and it happens to be one of the two things that Madeleine Albright suggested as things you could do today. One was to get out and run for office. And another is to talk to people you don't agree with, so.

I completely second that, I think it's really crucial that we talk to one another.

A great ending point. Thanks everybody.

Thank you.

We'll be back in your feeds shortly.

Thanks Jessica.

PART 3 OF 3 ENDS [01:02:07]