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Faculty Spotlight—Dr. Seth Masket

Abstract

Interview with Dr. Seth Masket

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Faculty Spotlight—Dr. Seth Masket

Interviewed by Owen McKessy and William Moody



1 WHAT ARE YOUR TEACHING INTERESTS? WHAT IS YOUR TEACHING PHILOSOPHY?

I do a lot of stuff within American politics, but my main interest is in political parties. I'm teaching a senior class right now that just focuses on presidential party nominations, but I teach campaigns, elections, and a party's class. I also teach a class that's a lot of fun called Simulation of American Governments, where each person plays a current member of Congress.

For me, in terms of teaching philosophy, I have found that lecturing at students is not very good teaching. If needed, I'm going to try and provide some history about things that have gone on in the past, but for the most part, I want it to be as participatory as possible to give students a sense of some of the things that I find exciting about the topics. It is largely about getting into why these things are questions, why these things are things we should care about, and to sort of dig into current issues in American politics and trying get some

of their passions for the topic. Many are aware that there is plenty of divisiveness and passion within politics right now. I'm not necessarily looking for people to start yelling at each other, but I just want to direct some of that passion and interest into basic questions about politics and why they exist.

2 HOW HAS THE PROCESS OF RESEARCH CHANGED IN THE PAST FEW DECADES IN YOUR FIELD?

It's changed in a number of ways, one of the big ones is the availability of data. 20 years ago, I was working on my dissertation research where I was focused on partisan behavior in California. I was digging up roll call votes cast by every state legislator in California history. That took several years to do. I had to get a grant for that, and there were several computer experts I was consulting with. It was a major project. Today, that information is just simply widely available to anyone who wants it. Researchers don't have to dig into it that way anymore. So, it's interesting in many ways, quantitative data has come easier to come by for a lot of scholars, but what to do with it is always a bigger mystery. It's easy to just dig up a bunch of numbers and find correlations between things, but it's difficult to actually understand the meaning behind them.

3 CAN YOU DESCRIBE YOUR CURRENT RESEARCH IN TERMS THAT EVERYONE WOULD UNDERSTAND?

I am just in the process of finishing a book that is on the Democratic Party between 2016 and 2020. I was interested in following a political party across an entire election cycle. I've been spending a ton of time interviewing insiders and party activists in some of the early contest states like New Hampshire, Iowa, South Carolina, Nevada, and DC. I wanted to get a sense of how people within the party were interpreting why they lost in 2016, and then what they do with that information. What I'm arguing is essentially that the Joe Biden nomination didn't just happen for no reason. While it wasn't necessarily obvious that it was going to

be him, there were a lot of the interpretations coming out of that election that the party may have moved too far toward diversity and inclusiveness. A number of people were thinking the party needs to scale back commitment in order to win an election. They were willing to surrender a fair number of their commitments in order to get a win. Even if it hadn't been for Biden, it would have been something along those lines. The party was leaning in the direction of a relatively moderate white guy.

4 WHAT WOULD YOU CHANGE TO IMPROVE HOW WORK IN YOUR FIELD IS DONE?

There's a style I like to practice when I research that is a combination of qualitative and quantitative work. So, I have a fair number of interviews that I've been doing for this book, and I find those really helpful. I think it's useful to understand how people within what you're studying are thinking and what kind of language they're using to describe it. I think it's also important to have good quantitative data about what's going on to be able to examine, as I do in my book, things like campaign finance patterns or shifts in polling or endorsement patterns. I would like to see more of the discipline moving in a way that really tries to use both. I think if you're just focused on the numbers, you can miss some important understanding about the way the political universe works. I think if you're just using interviews, you can be led astray by people who don't necessarily understand themselves what they're doing, so I think it takes a combination of approaches.

5 CAN YOU SHARE A TURNING POINT OR A TIME YOU MADE A SURPRISING DISCOVERY?

One thing that was really interesting was when I attended the summer meeting of the Democratic National Committee in 2018 in Chicago. This is not the big party convention with delegates, this is just DNC members. They were arguing through some reform movements about super delegates, and I had been following the debates that they've been having. I knew they were going to make some final decisions about this, so I was just interested in listening to what kind of language people use when they argued. I was so fascinated to hear how raw and emotional people were about these decisions. Very sharp, harsh language along racial lines was used by some African American leaders like, "anyone who supports this measure is basically like a slave supporting the Confederacy." I was shocked to hear stuff that was that raw, but it made me think, I'm researching a real thing here. It gave me some confidence that I was onto something important and it was worth bringing this

stuff to light.

6 WHAT MAKES YOU GET UP IN THE MORNING AND WHAT DO YOU REALLY LOVE ABOUT WHAT YOU DO?

What gets me out of bed in the morning is sometimes also the thing that keeps me up at night. I have the privilege of studying American politics at a really interesting time. It's not a quiet time in American politics, there are really dramatic and foundational things shifting all the time. It's a little terrifying, and it's not always very positive, but this is the stuff I'm interested in. Since Trump got into office, I've heard a number of people who are not political scientists talk to their political scientist friend and say, "Hey, it must be an interesting time to be studying politics." The usual rejoinder is, "it's sort of like being a doctor during a viral outbreak." Yeah, you're using your training and your skill. It's also a little scary, you don't know what's going to happen next, and a lot of things are being stretched to the limits. I'm studying things that are very, very alive right now, and I like that aspect of it.

7 WHAT DO YOU LIKE TO DO WHEN YOU'RE NOT WORKING ON RESEARCH?

I like to bake breads, cookies, and I decorate cakes. My go-to baked good would either be white chocolate chip oatmeal cookies or molasses spice cookies. Those tend to be crowd pleasers.

8 DESCRIBE YOUR CAREER TRAJECTORY AND ANY KIND OF ZIGZAGS OR CHANGES THAT YOU HAD.

I did not go straight into grad school when I finished college. I graduated from UC Berkeley in 1991, and I wanted to go work in Washington DC for a while after that, which I did. I worked for a little bit on the Clinton-Gore campaign in '92. Then I got a job in the Clinton White House from '93 to '96 in the correspondence office, writing letters, presidential messages, and proclamations. I absolutely loved that job and it was a great place to work and a great time to be there. My then fiancé, now wife, got into a master's program at Stanford, so we went to Northern California. There I worked in the local government for the county supervisor for most of the year and I learned a lot from that experience. I started grad school after that at UCLA and came to DU straight from there. I've lived in a number of different places, but that experience working in politics still informs a lot of the things I do. I still think back a lot on that time and

just have some sense of the incentives of campaigners, office holders, and candidates. I just really value that time..

9 WAS THERE EVER AN OUTCOME IN YOUR RESEARCH THAT WAS UNEXPECTED, OR DO YOU EVER ENCOUNTER LIKE A SURPRISING SETBACK? AND IF SO, HOW DID YOU REACT AND KIND OF ADAPT?

One of the ways is on this book project that I'm working on now. I had originally proposed to a publisher back in 2016, and my expectation at that time was that Donald Trump was going to lose the presidency. I wanted to spend the next few years interviewing Republicans as they figured out where their party went wrong, and how to change it because it was a really unusual nomination they went through. I wanted to study them as they figured out that they blew a winnable election, and I wanted to see how they would make changes in the party. Obviously, the fall election really threw a lot of people over, so my first instinct after that was okay, well, this book idea is dead. Not long after that, I came to this idea as I'm trying to figure out what went wrong. That's roughly what everyone else is doing too. I'm not the only one on this, and it would be interesting, not just for me to talk about how I got it wrong, but to understand why so many other people did too. So, I kind of leaned into my own error on this and wanted to understand how everyone else had come to the same incorrect conclusion as well.

10 SO IN YOUR KIND OF DAY TO DAY WORK, IS THERE ANY ONE PARTICULAR THING THAT YOU FIND THE MOST FRUSTRATING?

I hate grading, but I really enjoy teaching. that's just the mundane part of it that everyone has to do. I know, students don't like being graded, and I don't like administering grades. I would rather just have conversations with them about what they're learning about the reading material and read their writing. Grading is just of the necessary evils to the job.

11 IF YOU COULD GO BACK IN TIME AND GIVE YOURSELF ADVICE BEFORE YOU BEGAN YOUR CAREER. WHAT WOULD THAT BE?

I would say make sure you are serious about the subject you want to research. I had talked about this with some advisors in school early on, but there are benefits and cost depending on what you want to study. There are some who believe that you should study what you care

about and that's how you do good research. If you're writing a dissertation, you're going to be working on that for four years, five years, maybe longer, so it should be something you care about. On the other hand, you also want to think about what is it that someone else will want to read. What is it that someone else will want to have in their department someday when they're looking to hire you. I think I probably made the right call with my subject, but it's something additional to think about when you're getting started in this line of work. You need to think of the blend between what you care about and what you think other people will care about.

12 FOR PEOPLE INTERESTED IN YOUR BOOK WHERE CAN THEY FIND THAT?

I have a draft of it that is in production right now. It's supposed to come out in September from Cambridge Press, and it's called Learning From Loss: the Democrats 2016 to 2020.