

**Reforming Congress Project  
Sunwater Institute  
Interview with Michael Minta**

**CHERVENAK:** Michael, thank you so much for joining us.

**MINTA:** Oh, thank you for having me.

**CHERVENAK:** Why don't we start with your background, where'd you start, so the arc of your career, and where you are today?

**MINTA:** Yeah, sure, so I'm originally from a small town in South Carolina. I moved to St. Louis to go to college, and I received my undergraduate degree actually in political science at Washington University. I guess what got me really kind of started on this is, in this academia profession, is working with a professor there, John Gilmore. He's working on a project looking at social security reform.

I mean, I needed the money, but I actually also enjoyed the work. I found myself liking a lot. I even, I would ask John about his life as a professor, and he's like, oh I see you have to do a lot of writing, so yeah, you gotta do a lot of writing. Well that's not a profession for me, so judging most political science majors I was like, well maybe law school, but then I saw some programs on public policy and so I decided, okay well I'll just, I started getting more research and I decided to actually apply to some programs, and I was fortunate enough to get into University of Texas at Austin, the LBJ School of Public Affairs.

I was able to study with scholars and big public policy people like Barbara Jordan, so I was kind of in this track of being kind of a public policy analyst, and so after I graduated from the School of Public Affairs, I worked in state government as a policy analyst for a few years with the Texas attorney general's office, and then I was a policy analyst for this legislative oversight commission called the Sunset Commission, this bipartisan commission that looked at weeding out waste and efficiency in government.

For the most part I thought policy would be pretty much my career, but as I worked in government, dealt with state agencies and also the members themselves, I really wanted to explore more questions on how policy got done and not just making policy but understanding behavior of the interest groups that were lobbying members and how members came about making decisions. And so what I decided to do was like, I don't know, mid-career, like, hey I want to get a PhD, so I went back to graduate school.

I got a PhD at University of Michigan, political science, taught it. Since then I've taught at Washington University in Saint Louis, University of Missouri, Columbia, and now here I've been at the University of Minnesota for, this will be my sixth year starting in the fall.

**CHERVENAK:** Great, and so you kind of mentioned your overarching interest in political science or the political process. What are your broad areas of interest when it comes to research, and where do you spend the broad strokes of your time?

**MINTA:** Yeah, so I focus mostly on U.S. or American politics more broadly, mostly teaching and researching on, I teach courses in U.S. Congress, interest groups, race and ethnic politics, most of my research focuses, in Congress, I focus mainly on political behavior and how members make decisions and how they go about representing their constituents, and all of their constituents, focus on questions of political representation of underrepresented groups, interest group advocacy, lobbying, and then how race and ethnicity kind of politics kind of informs our understanding of how Congress works and how groups receive representation, so that's kind of like the broad interest of what I do.

**CHERVENAK:** Why don't we start, then, with this underrepresented groups topic. You've published books on this subject, and you've done a lot of research. Can you talk us through what are the kind of fundamental questions you had when you did this research and what were the findings that you came to, if any?

**MINTA:** Yeah, so no question. Like many, many students when you look at American politics and you look at a textbook and, you know, we hear the stories about the founding of the country and what our founders did and democracy and liberty and all of these different questions, and I was like, well, you know, I, we don't see much as it relates to minorities or underrepresented groups, Blacks, Latinos, women, and so I was just really curious about how do you get groups that were not necessarily included in the founding of the nation? How do they receive representation because they were incorporated in much later than our nation's founding, and so really looking at how those groups receive voice within an institution that historically hasn't necessarily been responsive or sometimes takes social movements in order to get those done.

So most of the time I'm looking at the political representation of Blacks and Latinos in particularly because they're the two largest minority groups. One day I will expand that to other groups, but really looking at how do minorities receive representation. Do you see differences between Blacks, Latinos, and white legislators in terms of representing minority interests in Congress on issues such as Civil Rights, racial issues? I mean we're having debates right now about racial justice, racial profiling.

How do members deal with those issues and address those issues? Most of the existing theories that we know is that members usually shy away from those. If they try to reach the median vote or the person that's in the middle, if that's where most of the voters are, then how, what's the incentive and what would motivate members to actually pay more attention to those questions? And so I explore, do we see differences? Does a diverse Congress really lead to better representation of these groups?

**CHERVENAK:** What did you find?

**MINTA:** Well yeah, so that's—to be quite, a bunch of research going like, well it really doesn't matter if you're Black or white, that as long as you can vote in ways and speak to issues that minorities care about, then, you know, it shouldn't matter. And also since Democrats usually are closely aligned, particularly after the Civil Rights movement, are closely or more closely aligned to the issues and the interests of Blacks, then clearly it's more about just getting Democrats elected and not necessarily that, you shouldn't see differences between white Democrats and Black or Latino Democrats.

And most of my research finds that there are differences. Some people's like, well, aha, yeah of course there are differences, but it's not clear, though, in the beginning because the argument is, well it's just Democrats and that's all you really need, but I found that in my research that you can't look just at how members vote on legislation, that you have to look at all these other activities that members engage in, such as attending an Oversight Committee meeting to make sure that, say, the Department of Justice or U.S. Health and Human Services, that they're actually implementing many of the Civil Rights laws and social programs that minorities care about.

I mean, very few laws are passed each year, as we know, and so, but most of what happens is making sure that the federal government is actually implementing and enforcing the various laws and so I, my research in my first book I look at, well, do you see differences who's coming to these Oversight Committee Hearings, say, for the U.S. Department of Justice and saying, hey, are you guys enforcing these Civil Rights laws?, and so I did see differences between Blacks and Latinos and white legislators, where Black legislators and Latino legislators were more likely to attend these hearings. They were more likely to question Department of Justice officials and say, are you doing all that you can possibly can to enforce these laws?.

Same thing with social welfare type of policies, are you providing, are you implementing programs and policies that are going to kind of eliminate poverty and inequality in these communities? And so I found that there are differences, and it's not just party that's predicting it, that there are these racial differences. So the question you might ask is, why would you think, what makes race so different, right? Like, why would it, kind of like, when you look at party, why would you still see differences because you would imagine a coalition for Democrats is pretty much the same, right?

And part of my argument that it's this idea of this racial group consciousness that goes on, that there's this obligation, racial and ethnic group consciousness, there's this obligation that goes back, maybe we can go back to W.E.B. Du Bois, and it's like this idea that you have to lift as you climb, and so this responsibility that members feel, and it's definitely that they have to do all they can to help uplift the minority community, to help eliminate any type of barriers.

And so while members, definitely all members are concerned about getting elected regardless of their race and ethnicity or their gender, but there is kind of this expectation and this obligation that you're going to do something to help not just everyone but help Black members

and, or Black members of the community, the whole community, to do better. Again, it's not saying that you should only look out for Blacks, but it's just this special obligation that because of this history of discrimination and current history of racial discrimination and employment and housing, that they have an obligation and an expectation to help out.

**CHERVENAK:** What about in terms of bills? You talk about Oversight Hearings. I'm curious, is there a difference in the nature of the bills that different groups, or different members, submit based on which groups they're part of?

**MINTA:** Yeah, so I mean obviously you see most of the differences, the racial differences, on issues that pertain to race, so if there's a bill that's, you know, John Conyers sponsored the anti-racial profiling bill for many years, or even symbolic bills such as the King holiday, I mean for many years over and over, he would introduce that bill, a bill on reparations. I don't think—he used to, kind of just introduced that bill every year but now he's, I think it's moved on. I can't remember who's sponsoring it now.

But yeah, these type of bills that deal with racial issues, you usually see minority members sponsoring it. As it deals with immigration, issues that deal with language, I shouldn't say immigration, but language differences, you start seeing mostly Latino members introducing those type of bills. And so that's where you see the greatest difference between Black, Latino, and white members, and also Republicans.

**CHERVENAK:** And this is in the nature of the bills themselves, that subject matter.

**MINTA:** Yeah, the actual bills themselves. You see most of the differences as it relates to race and, say, social welfare. Now if it's an issue, if it's a bill about the environment or the economy, then I, you usually don't see much, at least most of the research out there in terms of bills, you don't see much in the way of Black or Latino members sponsoring more bills in this area, but most of the existing research, and I haven't done any research on the bills' sponsorship yet, mostly on oversight, but the existing research that's out there shows that most of the differences that you see is based on, say, racial bills or social welfare bills. That's where you see the biggest difference.

And I see that also in terms of the oversight arena, poverty, inequality, so that's where you really see the big differences. Yeah, but if it's something like on the defense or environment, you don't see much, in a way. And there is really no expectation that Blacks, Latinos, and whites would see differently, would look, there's no expectation they would behave differently on these issues.

**CHERVENAK:** And so, I guess the question I have related to the race question on member activities, is it because they feel solidarity with the group, or is it because they experienced that same environment that that group experienced growing up, like is it more of, I know what they need, or is it, I identify with the group?

**MINTA:** Yeah, so that's a combination, so most members, most Black, Latino members of the Professional Black Caucus or the Professional Hispanic Caucus, they're, the vast majority of them are from a majority minority district, majority Black district, majority Latino district. And so, you know, parts like how do you disentangle like the theory I'm saying, oh it's kind of racial method, group consciousness, oh they're in a district with a bunch of Blacks, bunch of Latinos, and that's, I mean, it's, that is one of the biggest problems with trying to disentangle that.

But what we know is prior, like after Civil Rights movement, many districts where you had a majority, not majority Black but a sizable Black population in these Southern districts, where you had white Southern Democrats that just were not responsive on Civil Rights issues. And so this idea that it's all about the district, the composition of the district, yeah, the composition of district is important in terms of maybe putting some influence on members, but from what we know from historical studies and all that, that for the most part when you had these districts with a sizable Black population, that these members were not as responsive.

So that kind of brings in the theory, so now the district composition where you're getting Black members are now elected to some of these districts, and now some of them are, many of them are majority of Black districts, you're starting to see them actually behave in a way that is different from, say, a Southern white Democrat, and I think that is part of their connection. There is an experience, and I see that in some of the hearings that I looked at where you would see members of Congress, like a hearing on racial profiling, where members will say, I was personally stopped by the police, and I felt that I was profiled and so I understand that.

Now you know what's interesting, I've interviewed members in the past, and no one, they'll never tell me like, oh this is, you know, I represent everyone, racial group consciousness, it doesn't matter, but when you look in the actual transcripts, you see them talk about their own lived experience with many of these issues, whether it's racial profiling by the police, whether it's being followed in a store, I mean, it's, or members who lived in poverty, I mean many of these issues you can find it in the transcripts.

And that's a part about representation, it's this deliberation of actually—so people can vote, members can go in just like anyone, they could read, they can read a bill, they can read the witness testimony, and they can talk to interest groups, whether you're Black or white or Latino, and you can say okay, I'm going to vote the right way. But when you're in a debate and you're discussing these issues and people are bringing questions, it's like we're having this discussion right here, if it's something that comes up that's not in the presentation, then you have to rely on kind of your knowledge and your lived experience, and so that's what members bring to the table when they're debating these issues. They're talking about not just their book knowledge but also kind of how that experience helps inform the policy that's being discussed, whether it's a bill that's about to be implemented or the oversight activities of a particular agency.

**CHERVENAK:** Interesting. And so I think you've also done work related to the special interest groups that support some of the underrepresented groups that you've mentioned. So what is their role in the process, and how does that work in practice?

**MINTA:** Yeah, so I wanted to expand, and it was the second book that just came out, and I was looking at groups like the NAACP that you usually advocates for Blacks, UnidosUSA, which used to be the National Council of La Raza, big advocacy group for Latinos, and so I really want to look at this idea of how do these groups get voice, or receive voice, in Washington, on Capitol Hill. When you look at all the type of traditional measures that we use to try to assess influence, PAC contributions, how much money are they giving to the parties and to candidates. Well, many of these groups are 501(c)(3) or charity organizations. They raise money, or 501(c)(4) organizations, so there are limitations on how much they can contribute, if they can contribute at all, and also their lobby. There are certain restrictions placed on how much they lobby.

And so when you're dealing with a lot of big business groups, people on K Street, how do these groups when they're going to Congress and they're trying, if they basically are hindered by their resources, how do they compete, and somehow, on a level and level the playing field? And so the research I did, I looked at it more, I connected it to redistricting, and essentially saying that the one strategy these groups use particularly in the 60s and the 70s and still today is really try to really get in the redistricting process to create more majority Black, majority Latino districts.

And so part of my theory behind this is that if it's about PAC contributions and you don't, and you really can't do that because of the entity that you chose or, and also just the resources that you have, bring to bear to the table, then why not just try to create an environment where you can increase the chances of electing more of your allies to Congress? And some of the strongest allies for these groups are Black and Latino legislators, and so they were very heavily involved in these redistricting debates, created these majority Black and majority Latino districts, which has led to the increase of the number of Black and Latino legislators in the U.S. Congress over time.

And you can see that change and particularly in the United States House. The Senate, obviously you can't do any redistricting, and so my theory behind this is that if you can increase the number of Blacks and Latinos in Congress, that they'll be, you'll have allies who will, not just allies but advocates for many of the positions that these Civil Rights groups care about. So instead of, if we think that you know contributions, and it's very mixed on whether or not political contributions actually influence the way members behave, but you don't have to worry about it if you can just get your allies, get more advocates in there who can sponsor bills that you can care about, can go to oversight hearings, can go to markup hearings, can introduce amendments, that's where those groups, that's where diversity in Congress has helped those groups the most.

**CHERVENAK:** And so that's very interesting, so get allies elected. That makes it sound like a good strategy, and redistricting is one of the key ways you're saying that they accomplish that task. What about in terms of lobbying Congress itself or getting into the, convincing various

offices to vote on particular bills. Are they engaged in that kind of activity, or is it really focused more on the other areas you mentioned?

**MINTA:** Well yeah, and that's the tricky part of this, right, with being a 501(c)(3) or even a (c)(4), most of these groups don't like to call what they do lobbying, but that's what they do, right? It's just we have this really strange definition of lobbying, so if one of these groups took a bill to a member of Congress, as long as that member said, requested that bill, it's not lobbying. It's providing information. And so many of these groups, and it's not just the Civil Rights organizations, all of these groups know how this operates, is that these groups do provide advocacy. I'll use the word they use, they provide advocacy. And most of us, we might think that that's lobbying.

So yes, they do engage in it, but no one wants to really run into trouble with the IRS, right, so that's why they're really, that's why groups that are 501(c)(3)s or (c)(4)s really kind of tow that line on what they can and cannot do, and they, even if they're meeting with a member, depends on if the member requested the meeting, or whether those groups said, I'm going to go there and I want you to support this bill. So I think many of our lobbying disclosure reports, I mean I don't think they truly indicate how much lobbying or advocacy these groups do.

**CHERVENAK:** Well, if we if we reframe the topic just to information, so how do these groups provide information to Congress? Is it, do they go to committees and provide that? Are they suggesting oversight hearings like you were mentioning earlier because oversight seems to be important? What are the ways, what kind of information are they providing to Congress, and to which level? Is it member? Is it committee? Is it leadership? I'm curious about how that—

**MINTA:** Yeah, so these groups, I mean many of these groups are under-resourced, right, so there's maybe like one or two people that are actually what you would call their government relations person or lobbyists. Part of my theory and what I've found in my research is that on many issues these groups, they can't do everything, right, they can't lobby on every issue that they want to lobby on.

So part of my theory is that these groups, these members of Congress, these Congressional Black Caucus members, these Congressional Hispanic Caucus members actually do a lot of advocacy work on their own that aligns with these groups. And so yeah, these groups just like most groups, they'll meet with members and provide information on an issue that they looked at, they'll meet with members of Congress, so all of the traditional ways, testify at hearings, and that's one of the things that I found that as the diversity in Congress has increased over time, you see many of these groups testifying more over time as the Congress diversifies.

And I looked at a lot of other factors that could possibly explain this, but the biggest factor that I saw when I was studying that it's mostly you just have more diversity, and it's not just that Congress deals with more of these issues, you have more diversity, so they're testifying more, you're seeing more of their bills that they care about receive markup hearings because of the

diversity, so you're really starting to see many of the issues get greater attention. Now passage is a different story, but getting more attention because of this diversity is important.

**CHERVENAK:** And are there specific committees where most of that attention is focused? Is it justice or some other area?

**MINTA:** Mostly like House Judiciary, Senate Judiciary is where most of the Civil Rights, where, has jurisdiction over Civil Rights issues, also criminal justice issues are usually under these jurisdictions. But there's also like House Financial Services, where you're talking about the, in the 2000s with the great recession and the financial crisis, you saw many hearings there talking about predatory lending and how it affected minority communities, and so you got interest groups testifying, you got members of Congress asking tough questions, thinking about solutions on how it not just affected the country as a whole, because it affected everyone, but also how it affected Black and Latino. So you saw that, you see you see that happening.

**CHERVENAK:** So I'm curious, if we go back to the redistricting question for a second, I'm curious on a theoretical, and even on a practical matter, I mean you've studied this for some time. So if you have a district that's, you know, I don't know what they are but maybe you could tell me, you know if it's like 60 percent Latino, for instance, and so they elect a Latino as part of that district, do they feel like they're better off than if they were 30 percent in two districts of Latinos and they didn't have any Latino in Congress? Is that kind of the calculation they're making, or, and do they get better representation if they have a safer district in the long run?

**MINTA:** Yeah, so that's always the big conundrum, right, and you've actually seen these internal battles within the parties. And mostly what I'm referencing is mostly the Democratic Party because that's where you get most of the Black and Latino legislators, and so there has been this internal debate about party considerations and also balancing that against kind of descriptive representation of having more Blacks and having more Latinos in Congress, and in this example more Latinos in Congress, right?

Do you want more Democrats if you break the district up? Is it better just to have more Democrats that are sympathetic toward Latino interest, or is it just better to have one Latino interest, one Latino legislator, and then have that other district be a Republican district where Republicans usually don't have the same track record as Democrats on Latino issues?

Yeah, that's that internal battle where the Civil Rights groups are like, no, we want that one Latino because it's—even now, I mean even though we've seen some progress, right, where you're seeing Black legislators winning in majority white districts and states, but when you look at the numbers, the vast majority of Black and Latino district members are from majority minority districts. Either it's a majority Latino district or majority Black district or a combination of, like in California and Texas where it's a combination of Blacks and Latinos forming a majority minority district. So that's usually where most of these members come from, and I think that you are starting to see some debates about how you can mess around with, I don't want to say

mess around, but, can adjust those percentages where you can still get a Latino member without affecting the chances of the party.

**CHERVENAK:** So that's the trade-off that they're concerned with, is the race versus the Democratic party itself, that seems to be the conflict there.

**MINTA:** Right. Members will always say, what good is it to have more Blacks or more Latinos if you're in a minority, then you can't control the agenda, you can't get anything done, so they're always trying to balance that.

But there's also been pushback on this idea that drawing a majority Black district, now again if you pack a district, right, with 90 percent—no, I don't, Democrats don't like that, Republicans don't like that, but if you, but there is this idea that if you have, say, a 60 percent Black district or Latino district, that somehow that hurts Republicans and, you know, other, some scholars would push back and say well, no it's not you've lost, I mean, you got to win. You can't just put it on Black voters or Latino voters, you also have to appeal the white voters, too.

And so Democrats have talked about adjusting their message and not just putting it all on one group, that you also have to appeal to much for our constituencies, so how do you talk about issues that Blacks, Latinos are concerned about without alienating white voters, and that's always the challenge of the Democratic party.

I think that's going to be a challenge for the Republican party coming up soon, too, even though we like to think that, oh you know, it's mostly a party that caters toward whites, and I've even had some colleagues, like, Republican Party is officially now the white party, but I mean, I don't know, if you start looking at the demographics and how groups are slowly being or incorporating and increasing their participation and becoming a bigger shared electorate, I just think that Republicans, I think especially on the long term, are adjusting their messaging.

Maybe right now it's descriptive representation, where you're starting to see more prominent, like Tim Scott, you know I've heard he's been rumored as a possible Presidential candidate. I think you're going to start seeing more and more of that. Now the question is, will it lead to substantive changes in in the agenda of these politicians that are running. That remains to be seen.

**CHERVENAK:** So I also wonder, I'm assuming that some of these districts when they draw them that way, they might be safer districts than other kinds of districts, there's maybe less competition for the seat, and whether that has an impact on representation because it's possible that if the seat's too safe, it leads to the less aggressive representative, you know, they don't have to work as hard to be re-elected. I don't know if that's a consideration that's been—

**MINTA:** Well you know, that's the challenge, like even if you go beyond race, right, I mean you know I'll talk to students and they'll say, we want competition, we want real competition because you know, we always say, oh there are only about 25 to 35 seats in the House that are

truly competitive. And then I'll say okay well, look at the district here in Minneapolis. Do you want them to redraw the district and make it a very competitive, and they're like, ah well I don't know if I really want that, right, so like we want this competition—Democrats say they want it, Republicans say they do—but do they really want it?

And so we always find control for the House and even the Senate is just based on like a small number of seats. I mean, I don't think there is, as much as we say we want competition, but when you really put it in people's face, like, okay do you really want to be in a district where your member might actually lose, especially, you know, I think they backtrack on that. At least I see that a lot.

**CHERVENAK:** All right, well great. Well let's move on to another subject I know that you're thinking about these days, which is, and most people are, which is the pandemic. And you've been doing some work related to the pandemic. Can you share with us sort of what you're doing, what you're looking at, and any results you've found so far?

**MINTA:** Oh yeah, man, thanks for that question. Yeah, I mean I just changed my whole kind of research, you know, in March of 2020 I'm working on another project dealing with like Congress and corporate money, and then the pandemic happens, and I'm like oh my gosh, I got to figure out what's going on here, everyone's trying to figure out, right?

So everyone's like, oh Trump, he's terrible, and you know the Executive Branch, and how could they not do it, FDA and I was like, oh God, there's, that's so, there has to be more to this story, right? It can't just be the President. So I, you know obviously my interest in Congress, I was like, well what was Congress doing, you know, and why are we so ill prepared to deal with this and respond to this crisis? And so what I did is I just recalibrated, started working on a project trying to look at Congressional attention to infectious disease, communicable diseases since the 1900s, and so really looking at the politics kind of behind this, what's driving this.

And so, do you see Democrats paying more attention in the Congress to these issues than Republicans, or Republicans paying more attention than Democrats? Do you see, I even moved it over to Executive Branch, do you see in terms of, do you see differences between Democrats and Republicans, in terms of responding to these issues and paying attention to these issues? So I'm looking at that over time. Obviously, we live in a polarized world, too, and many studies about growing polarization, and so how much does polarization affect our ability to pay attention whether to prepare or even respond to these issues, so got some very, still collecting data, doing some preliminary analyses, but I don't, I think there's enough blame to go around for everyone, with my initial analysis.

**CHERVENAK:** No preliminary results to share?

**MINTA:** Not any that I would want to stand by right now because it could change. But yeah, but right now what I am noticing is that polarization doesn't seem to really affect this public health issue. It seems to be somewhat different from the other issues that, you know maybe if we're

talking about welfare reform or something like that, then you start seeing the clear policy differences or maybe even racial issues, but on public health there seems to be some, I don't think it is polarization is really driving this the way we think that it is.

**CHERVENAK:** Awesome. So maybe we can move on to the questions that I ask all the guests on the program so I can someday compare the answers. Okay, are you ready to move on to those?

**MINTA:** Yeah, yeah, let's do it.

**CHERVENAK:** The first one I think we've already talked about a little bit, but I would like to get your personal opinion on, is what you think Congressional representation should mean?

**MINTA:** Well, and that's always the conundrum, right? From the founding, right, should members of Congress, do they have an obligation just to represent their districts or their states, you know, local versus the national representation of, federalists and anti-federalists had these debates and, you know, can we can we have a Congress that addresses pressing national issues right now like the, trying to solve the pandemic, get us out of this pandemic, or infrastructure, but yet still pay attention to the local needs, such as if farmers that are affected by this drought right now, should we have policies that specifically benefit a particular district, or communities that are affected by crime and racial profiling.

I mean, can we deal with local issues and also national issues at the same time, and that's the balance that members are trying to work through, even now. I mean, this is nothing new. And so, I think that representation has to be a mixture of looking after the national interest but at the same time paying attention closely to the local interest.

Just because you live in an urban area doesn't mean what is happening to farmers doesn't have an impact on you. It sure certainly does, right? You get your food, all that stuff matters, and so I think that really trying to figure out ways that members can operate in the national interest and also take care of local interests is what we're dealing with now.

Now, party polarization, I mean Congress is, I mean many scholars are looking at how the competition between the parties for control of the House and the Senate, it's intense. I mean it's probably, remember Democrats dominated most of the 20th century, earlier 20th century, and it started getting more competitive like in the mid-1990s, and so it seems that this fight for trying to control the chamber has made it difficult for Congress to work kind of on the national frame and also thinking more on party, where party is trying to maintain the majority or get back the majority, is making it difficult to really represent those national interests, so now you're starting to see more partisans.

**CHERVENAK:** In terms of your personal opinion, if I kind of dig in on the question a little bit, so you know, you're elected to Congress, do you represent the people who voted for you or the whole district? Is it everyone, or is it the voters, or the primaries voters?

**MINTA:** Oh yeah, that's, I mean obviously in theory you're supposed to represent everyone in your district, but there's obviously well-documented research that shows that members represent their district based on the issues that are in front, right, so every issue has a variety of different constituencies. A matter of fact, even when I work in Texas that's how, I mean there's research that bears out in Congress, but even in Texas that's how every issue that we work on, whether it's highways or the environment, members, these constituents, come to mind.

Now the problem with that, it's only a limited number of people, right, so maybe if you came to my office and lobbied, or maybe it's someone who was a campaign contributor, but there are other people out there that aren't organized, can't lobby, but have interest, and members are supposed to represent those interests, but you know they see, it's, they represent who they see, and so that could be a problem.

And that's something, I mean, we're all human, right, we like to think that we're taking every, I'm sure members are thinking, you know I'm thinking I'm looking after everyone, but in a lot of ways they're just limited in terms of, do they truly have the capacity to gather in all the interests of their constituents. And I'm sorry, sending out a letter to a couple of people or a few people in your district, that's not a scientific survey.

**CHERVENAK:** So it sounds like you think, at least in theory, they should represent the whole district, right? Everyone in the district, not just a minority of people, whether it's a special interest or something else, it's everyone in the district, now?

**MINTA:** Well, yes, but let me put a caveat to that, and this is something that the founders said, right, people have intensities of preferences, so if there's a group where policy could really affect them or disproportionately affect them, but everyone else doesn't care about or somewhat apathetic about it, then long as that person with that intense preference, long as it's not hurting other people, then maybe there's some give and take on, well okay, yeah, you really feel strongly about this, it's going to help, it could, I don't necessarily see how it's going to help everybody, but it can help you, and it can help us be a stronger district, and then that other group who may have an intense preference, but this group doesn't have intense preference, then yeah, so I think it's a give and take type of thing in terms of how you represent.

So, I don't want to say that, I don't want to put a negative thing on special interest because that's usually how it is, right, like if you represent, you're pro-environment or anti-environment. People say, oh that's a special interest. People could say a Civil Rights group's a special interest, but these are organized groups. Everyone has their own preferences and intensity about these, and so I think there's room for maneuver, and that's what legislators are trying to do every day.

**CHERVENAK:** There's an interesting nuance that you're bringing in with regard to these intensities because you know everyone may be equal in the district in theory for representation, but if some are having a major issue and others aren't, how do you, how does the legislator respond to that? It's a key one. What about in terms of the debate around, you're reflecting the beliefs of the constituents versus what you judge to be their interests, whether

you make judgments or whether you're just a pass-through for their beliefs, where do you come out on that one?

**MINTA:** Yeah that's, if you're saying that I know, kind of like the trustee type, like I know what's in the best interest of the district, you don't know. In some ways I don't necessarily say I buy into the trustee versus delegate. I don't, where the delegate versus trustee, delegate, I vote a certain way, you just do what I say, right, voters, member, you just do it, or a member who's elected and said, I don't care what you guys think, I'm going to do what I—I don't necessarily believe in those extremes. I think it's somewhere in the middle, right, where members are in a position where they do have more information, they have or they're supposed to have, more information, right?

Again, it depends on like the average constituent, they don't have as much information as a member's office, but you do have certain groups that have more information than the members themselves, so they're trying to really balance this, balance making policy based on an electorate that may not be as informed, and it's not, and to me I don't think that's necessarily a negative. People, like, oh people don't know anything. You can't know everything, there's no way you can know everything, but you do want a member who can kind of assess what the groups want who really are informed and know what, against the ordinary constituent that may not have an idea, try to balance those interests and then make an assessment because they do have to make an assessment.

So, I don't want to say that people, it's like a pass-through, I think that a good legislator is balancing all those interests and trying to come with the right decision. Now obviously there are some members, you're right, that probably don't care as much, but in my experience working with or talking to different members, they're trying to make those tough calls and those decisions.

**CHERVENAK:** All right, great. My next question is, how would your ideal Congress allocate its time, and that means in D.C. versus in the district, or working on legislation versus oversight versus campaigning, you know, where do you see that balance?

**MINTA:** Yeah, you know you talk to most members, obviously they say they want to spend more time learning, if they're on particular committees, they want to learn more about the policies and the issues that come before their committee, but they feel that they spend so much time fundraising, and I mean that's just kind of the reality of the situation, right?

Like you can't make policy if you don't get elected, and so I think that if we could find some way to bring some more balance where members can concentrate more on policymaking, whether it's in hearings, listening to agencies, and like yeah we passed this law a while back, but it's not necessarily as effective as we want, we might need to make some tweaks to it, or maybe we need more resources to implement a particular piece of legislation, give members more resources or time where they could go home, like you said, and go to the district, talk to people, not just in a purely, oh I want to get elected face, but really trying to figure out what members

of, what the constituents want, and what they should be working on, getting more information like that.

So, I think splitting that time between the district, I don't know how to, how I would put a percentage on, like first being in D.C. versus being in the district, I think they're both equally important, right? I mean, it's hard to be a representative if you're not back at home really talking to the people, talking to the groups and how national policy and local policies are affecting them, so I think that's important.

But you have to bring that local experience and that knowledge, bringing it to the table in D.C. in order to negotiate with party leaders, also work across the partisan, I do still think there's room for bipartisan, but I don't think, I don't believe in bipartisanship just for the sake, just to say it's bipartisan. I think that there's evidence that members from both parties have similar interests, but it goes back to this question of, they're still fighting for majority control and so sometimes it's hard to really, to get these members, or get these policies that they care about a pass because they're always trying to find an angle to stay in that majority or get back into the majority.

**CHERVENAK:** Well that leads nicely to my next question, which is, how should debate, deliberation, or dialogue occur or be structured in Congress? You know, should we have debates on the floor, should that discussion, compromise be in committee, should it be transparent to everyone on T.V., or should it be private in the back room? What are your thoughts on that?

**MINTA:** Yeah, I mean obviously Congress, I mean obviously over the years they just, Congress is just in so many different policy areas, far more policy areas than the founders would have ever imagined. I think committees, and that's the thing you'll probably hear many scholars and probably members of Congress themselves will say, that they wish committees were stronger.

But then there's also party leadership, you know, that should be stronger, and so I think that at committees that's where you get the information, that's where you get the knowledge, you can gain expertise. Debates on the floor, I think that's, many people like to say that's symbolic. I mean, those are actually important too because they go into Congressional debates on C-SPAN. Only geeks like me probably go and read like the transcripts of Congressional hearings and, or even, yeah, I read the transcripts and sometimes watch them on C-SPAN, so but the floor debates, people watch those, and maybe even the local media might pick up a good floor debate.

So, but I think most of the work, most of the liberation, has to occur particularly in the House of Representatives in the committee level and the subcommittee level and the Senate also. It's just where the work gets done. Now the now the question is, how powerful should these committees be in terms of if the committee sits down and they gain expertise in a particular issue and the committee proposes a policy, but then the party leaders say, well it's not the best for the party, I mean I think that's always a sticking point here.

**CHERVENAK:** Right. Well next question is, what fundamental institutional improvement should Congress make within 50 years?

**MINTA:** Wow, I know people want to talk about the filibuster and all of that, but I I'm going to stay away from that because I'm sure everyone has a take on it. I think something as simple as just believe it or not, pay the staffers more. Try to retain the talent that they have. I mean, it's a shame that I think that people will come in, staffers committed, you know, learning the process, kind of learning on the government's dime, getting all this information, skills, and experience, and then they move over to a more lucrative job in the private sector.

Now granted, that's their prerogative to do, but I think it would be nice if we actually paid staffers, committee staffers too, I mean particularly committee where you're getting all that expertise, and to pay them and to retain them so that they don't have to go to these private entities and whatever, working for this big lobbying firm, where a career in government is attractive and they can actually stay there, and I think that would just really help us make better policy, and it wouldn't keep us at this, at a disadvantage, and when I say us, I'm talking about the American people. I think it wouldn't put us at a disadvantage when we're talking with interest groups.

Because if you're always rotating people in and out, you're having someone in who's only been there for a year or two, then I mean but you have some lobbyists or a person from advocacy group that's been there for 15, 20 years and more knowledgeable, I mean it's just, I just think it's not a fair fight, so I really believe that we should pay more money. I mean I know that's probably not a popular thing, but I think we should try to keep the talent and experts invested—

**CHERVENAK:** Invest in expertise, right? I mean, I think that's a totally legitimate use of finance for the Congress, right? And I think they just passed something related to that, so there's hope.

**MINTA:** Yeah, I hope so too because that's very, capacity is so important. We shouldn't, I mean like you said, one of the greatest law making bodies, maybe the premier law making body in the world, and the turnover and staff is just troubling to me.

**CHERVENAK:** Next question is what, book or article most shaped your thinking with respect to Congress?

**MINTA:** Wow. There's so many. Gosh, well, I mean the one I think, one book that really kind of got me thinking about my research agendas, like "Tyranny of the Majority," Loni Guinier, and it really just made me think about this idea of representation and whether or not you need diversity in Congress, whether this whole strategy to get more Blacks, to get more Latino and Latinos in Congress, whether that, and really she focused mostly on Blacks, does it really lead to better representation of their interests? Just because you got more faces doesn't mean that it's going to lead to more representation. So, I've spent really most of my career really trying to

answer that question. Does it make a difference? Can you just have whites, can you have white allies, and can you still get the movement on these type of policies? And so that's, I think that's the book that's really kind of—if you had to name one, there are many, but it's the one that's kind of really made me think about what I do.

**CHERVENAK:** Great, well before I go into my last question, I was thinking about your opening remarks and your background and talking about when you were in Texas and your work on the sunset provisions in Texas, so I wanted to bring that back for a minute, if you can go back in time to when you were working in that area. Texas is famous for this concept of sunsets on its legislation, and we don't have that in Congress, whereas maybe we should, so I'm curious, since you've had that experience, what was your perspective on sunsets while you were working in that area, and do you think that's something that could be brought to Congress, or should be?

**MINTA:** Yeah, I mean sunset in a lot of ways, these good government provisions where you're just, you're always forced to re-evaluate, I mean that is an interesting question. I mean, we do have some federal laws where basically they expire, and you got to either reauthorize or it goes away. I mean the reauthorization process at the federal level, though, is an agency can still continue without being reauthorized, and so I think, federal government is so different, right, it could just do things that you necessarily can't do at the state level, but you know, Texas, if an agency isn't reauthorized and it's abolished, and so, but I can't imagine that on the federal level, right, if you didn't reauthorize a certain agency or certain provisions that we would actually abolish it.

But there might be for various programs and things like that where an agency, where a law is about to expire, and really taking a hard look at whether or not we need this federal program. It's like in Texas we'd look like at the Department of Health. Should it be authorized, or should it just be abolished, or should it be merged? I mean, we rarely ever recommended that our commission abolish anything. Even if we did, even the smallest agencies, we said, oh it should be merged, and groups would like, no no no, you can't do that, you can't do that, and then they'd start, they would, if we didn't, if the professional staff or we didn't agree with them, they're going to the member's office, the members come back, what are you guys doing, what are you talking about, but like we got all this information here and we have the data and say well, it'd be better if it was merged here, and the commission was just like, no we're going to do it.

But there were a lot of good things that we were able to do, where we were able to reauthorize agencies and provide greater legislative clarity because their roles have changed over time. It really makes members take a harder look at whether this, whether federal program or, excuse me, a state program, and I imagine if we do it federally, should be continued and whether you can spend resources on it, or should we change it to adapt to the times, and so that's maybe, that's, yeah, I agree. I think maybe on the federal level we could consider something like that, but yeah.

**CHERVENAK:** Right, well good. So, my last question is really about your plans for the long term in terms of research. Is it pandemic, do you have other things on the horizon? Why don't you share with us your long term?

**MINTA:** Yeah, so my, still working, I'll work on the pandemic research, try to get that finished up and figure out what went wrong and really looking at Congressional attention and preparedness and to see what can we, and hopefully it'll lead to some type of not just an academic publication but maybe something that could help legislators make better decisions on how we look at public health and maybe related to like disaster preparedness too.

I'll probably, but once I, I'll have that project going on, but I, there's another project I'm still interested in, interest groups and corporate money and how corporate money in a lot of ways relates to nonprofits. That's something that's somewhat not explored as much. We always like to think of corporate influence as kind of this one-to-one relationship, where they form a PAC or they give money to members of Congress, not directly, obviously, but through PACs and stuff like that, and they can influence policies, whether it's how members vote, whether or whether markup type of provisions to get put in bills.

I want to look at more of how they give to non-profit entities, so not just members but influencing how different groups rally against or behind certain policies, so it's like corporate foundations, they give money to these nonprofit groups, and so maybe on an issue that you think that the group would be opposed to, but they actually got some type of corporate money, so their influence extends beyond just Congress but also the various groups, non-profit groups, that they've, that they provide donations to. So that's what I'll be focusing on.

**CHERVENAK:** Fantastic. Well, Michael, thank you so much for joining us.

**MINTA:** No, thanks, man. Appreciate it.

**CHERVENAK:** It's been a pleasure.