

**Reforming Congress Project
Sunwater Institute
Interview with Jennifer Victor**

Jennifer Victor - Part 1

CHERVENAK: Dr. Victor, thank you so much for joining us.

VICTOR: I'm happy to be here.

CHERVENAK: Why don't we start with your background, where you started, sort of the arc of your career, and what you're doing now?

VICTOR: Great. I'm honored to share this time with you and excited to talk about the topics here, stuff that I've literally been studying my whole life. So I guess my quick bio is I grew up in Southern California. I did my undergraduate degree in political science at U.C. San Diego, which was just a tremendous world-class exposure to the field of political science, where I got to study with a lot of great professors and get involved with research.

And I went straight from that to Washington University in St. Louis, where I did my M.A. and PhD focusing on Congress, working with people like Steven Smith and Gary Miller and Randy Calvert and a bunch of other smart folks. And at that point I was really interested to study, I was really motivated by this idea that there are groups of people in the United States that are sort of voiceless or underrepresented or challenged when it comes to how government serves them. And I wanted to better understand why policies ever get made for those populations, whether it's, you know, children, or trees, or dogs, or prisoners, or whatnot, and just what are the conditions under which we do that.

And so I wrote a dissertation focused on Congress and lobbying in the different contexts under which lobbyists choose their strategies, and that from there I went, got an assistant professor position at the University of Pittsburgh, where I spent the first nine years or so of my career. Shortly after arriving at Pitt I did the APSA Congressional fellowship, so I spent a year on Capitol Hill, which was really transformative in my career.

You know, all of my training up to that point had been very economics, rational choice, quantitative, social science focused, and then I got to Capitol Hill in 2005, and I was working in the office of Kent Conrad, a former Senator from North Dakota, and I kept making all of these observations that didn't fit into my social scientific models of the world because it seems to me that we were co-sponsoring this bill with Senator Santorum's office because these two legislative aides used to work together on that committee or for that lobbying firm or whatnot, and there seemed to be a lot of that.

There seemed to be a lot of, this appears to be happening because of different types of relationships and connections that I was observing, some of which seemed very casual or

unofficial. And I did not understand how to take that observed information and fit it into my book knowledge about how Congress worked. And I just sort of puzzled over it and sat with it for a while, and then a few years after that I got an email, just an advertisement for a conference that was going to be run at Harvard, the Political Networks Conference, the first one that David Lazer and James Fowler ran in 2008, I think, at Harvard. And I read the description of what they were going to do, and I went, that's it. That's what I need to learn and know about.

So these were social scientists, political scientists, who were taking stuff from sociology and mathematical graph theory and computer science and merging it for the purpose of studying relationships in politics. And I went to that conference and was just hooked. I was just sold that this is what politics is about, this is the way we should study politics. And so it really transformed my research agenda at that point, and I started, you know, really diving into the theory and the networks and the methods and the various questions that we could use to better understand how the world works.

So from there I did a bunch of writing on various types of Congressional networks between staffers and with caucuses, which I think you and I will probably talk about more because I'm still working on that stuff, and lobbyists and campaign contributions and all sorts of these inputs into what goes into how Congress works. Then I came to George Mason University in 2012, where I still am on faculty here, and I've worn a bunch of different hats since I've been here professionally that have really enriched the way I understand the world.

I really like the proximity of being just near Congress and being able to pop over there from time to time. You know, I've done a fellowship in the Kluge Center at the Library of Congress. I've got, I serve on the Board of Directors for the Center for Responsive Politics, which most people know better as Open Secrets, which is a non-profit, nonpartisan campaign finance organization. I've served as the past president of the National Capital Area Political Science Association, and just the relationships and the different types of scholarly and more, some people call it pracademic and sort of the practical pragmatic practical side of politics, has just been a really nice fit for me, so I've really enjoyed the intellectual environment in D.C. and at Mason. And then of course there's students, and Mason undergrads are just the best. They're a wonderful population to work with.

CHERVENAK: So in terms of your overall research, is it really the networks that's the focus, or do you have some other areas that you've been looking at? I mean I've seen some of your work relates to the U.S. Congress but also not just the U.S., you're looking at legislators more generally. So can you talk, are you doing any work in those types of areas?

VICTOR: I have done some work on legislatures not related to Congress. Most of that work has been co-authored with others who are experts in those other Congresses. This book that Nils Ringe and I wrote a few years back where we compared the European Parliament to the U.S. Congress, and, but he's the Europeanist and I'm the Americanist, and it was a very nice collaboration. We got some nice comparisons between the two institutions, but by and large I would say I'm mostly a Congress scholar, but a Congress scholar that gets really attracted to

shiny objects that are tangential but related to Congress, like political parties and lobbyists. And to me I have a little bit of that problem that, you know, some academics have that once you learn how to use a hammer, everything looks like a nail. So I see networks everywhere that I go, everything is a network, and I'm constantly fascinated by the ways, the patterns of relationships that we can describe mathematically, that have these known properties, how that helps us understand what's going on in those in those institutions.

CHERVENAK: Why don't we start with your work on the caucuses because I think that's something that maybe most people have no knowledge of within Congress. I mean, obviously they may know the Republican or the Democratic type of caucus events or those kind of headlines, but what kind of work have you done on caucuses? What exactly are they, and what have you found in your research?

VICTOR: Yeah, so caucuses fascinate me in part because they've just proliferated over the last couple of decades. So the background here is that when you think about the middle of the Twentieth Century where the Democrats sort of dominated the House of Representatives in its majority for a long time, they developed these either legislative service organizations or Congressional member organizations depending on how they were put together, and there were a dozen or two of those. And they came under quite a bit of scrutiny towards the late '80s, early '90s, Republicans got very critical of Democrats for these organizations because they saw these caucus groups as essentially avenues of corruption, that they were avenues of bringing money into Congress and using funds inappropriately.

And so when the Republicans took the majority after the '94 midterm election, one of the first things that speaker Newt Gingrich did was outlaw the caucuses. No more caucuses, no funding, no offices, no staffing, no stationary, nothing.

CHERVENAK: But just to understand what the caucuses are, they're groups of members that get together on a particular topic, is that right?

VICTOR: That's right, so it's a, two of the key features are that they are entirely voluntary, so anybody can join them, and they're really very casual. There aren't any rules. It's not like there's a maximum number of members that can be in a caucus or a maximum number of caucuses that members can join. And back in the early '90s, we saw, after Gingrich got rid of them is when they started exploding, ironically. So that was his unintended consequence.

But it turns out as Nils and I studied in our book that we published a few years back called "Bridging the Information Gap," caucuses exploded in that way because they were filling an institutional need, like solving a collective action problem that the structures of Congress didn't already solve. So you've got political parties as a key organizing feature of Congress, but everybody has to join a party, and parties really form that base foundation of how Congress organizes. And then you've got the committee system, which is what that foundation is built on, about how we organize for bills and legislating and also, and developing expertise and all of that key function.

But committees are limited in how many people can join them, and they get really specialized, and you sit on them for years on end, and so you can only serve on so many. And with caucuses you've got that more freewheeling thing, where if I'm a member of Congress and I sit on the Transportation Committee and the Budget Committee, but I'm really interested in disease science and I just don't sit on any of the committees that do that stuff, well then I can go and join the Parkinson's Caucus and the Alzheimer's Caucus and whatever else, of things that interest me.

And so caucuses become this way for members of Congress to engage in that sort of expressive, some might call it symbolic or performative, expression of what topics interest them or what their constituencies want them to be, you know, active on, and surely, I mean absolutely a lot of what goes on in caucuses is symbolic or performative. It's cheap talk, as a lot of Congress scholars would call it, but I think it's also the case that because it's cheap talk and it's a very low cost activity to participate in, it creates what network scholars call weak ties.

So if you and I are members of Congress and we're both in the Biking Caucus, so the Bike Caucus is pretty big, it's one of the fun ones, and Earl Blumenauer is the big champion of the Bike Caucus, and he runs around Congress with his little bicycle emblem on his lapel all the time, and he gives them out to whoever will take them. And he's adorable, and his staff are just great, by the way, they talk about, because everything is biking to them.

So it's a fun group, and they're robust and they've got a lot of members, but to them it's an avenue to make relationships with other members of Congress. It's an avenue to talk about pollution and transportation and federal taxation and all sorts of issues that you don't think of as bicycles, but it becomes this frivolity that turns into a way to sort of channel real policy discussion.

And not all caucuses are like that. Some of them—I mean there's a Beer Wholesaler's Caucus, and some of them are pretty obscure. There's an Ethiopian Jewry Caucus. And, you know, I cannot tell you that most of these are like serious organizations. Some of them probably only exist on paper or just a list serve, but by and large almost all the caucuses, you know, it's something like, there's probably, I don't have a count for the current Congress, but the last count I did was 115th Congress, and there were more than 700 caucuses that were organized in that Congress.

So the number of caucuses has just been growing since the early '90s. It's like this linear trend over time, and so we're just adding more and more caucuses. And most of them, the vast majority of them, are truly bipartisan. They have Republicans and Democrats engaged in them.

So the fact that they are these voluntary weak tie organizations from a network perspective is sort of normatively good because weak ties is where we can expect some exposure to other to come along in ways that may benefit decision making. And so I'm really interested in how the properties of the network of shared caucus memberships differs from, say, the network of

shared committee memberships or shared co-sponsorships because I think these networks have very different properties that we can predict and then study and help use that to help us leverage and understand the conditions for, particularly for cross-partisan cooperation in Congress.

CHERVENAK: So what's the data like for these caucuses? I mean, do you know, for instance, how much time any individual member spends in the individual caucus, or is there, and also on the power question, is whoever sets up the caucus of the chairman of the caucus? Do they get any kind of official title out of it?

VICTOR: So the way that I collect the data is typically from the Congressional Yellow Book, which is just one of these D.C. publications that's like a phone book, and each member has a little bio page in there, and one of the things they list in the bio are the caucuses that they are a member of. And so we just go through by hand and, so there's no central database of caucus, of who's in which caucus. The House Committee on Administration does technically keep a registration of caucuses, and if you are a caucus you're supposed to register with the House Administration Committee, but you're not required to register, and there's no consequences for not registering.

So I find that upwards of fifty of caucuses, in fact, are not registered. And then the Committee on Administration doesn't keep membership lists, they just keep chairs and co-chairs, if like there's officers of the caucus, so the only way to get the membership data is to go through these bios. That's the only systematic way that I've discovered.

Some of the more well-organized, well-known caucuses like the Congressional Black Caucus or the Blue Dogs or the Fire Services Caucus, some of these big groups that have been around for a long time, they get in the paper every once in a while, they have websites and they list their members on there. But you know, that's not the majority of caucuses. Most of them are these small fry groups that are really just a list serve.

But I want to know who the small fry groups are because that's where those weak tie connections are coming from that I think can be so valuable. Members who are chairs of caucuses do hype that up. They'll promote that on their websites and put that as one of their sort of titles that they use because it shows some leadership on the issue. And to be a chair of a caucus, you do have to be a little bit more engaged, a little bit more active to some extent, even if your group doesn't ever hold any meetings.

The longer answer to your question is, the only way to get true information about how active caucuses are or how much time, as you said, members spend in these groups would be to go around and interview everybody about it. And I've done some of that, but it's really hard to collect that information in a holistic way. So mostly what I've got is sort of this metadata where I look at these network properties based on co-memberships.

CHERVENAK: Right. And is there any correlation between who's in what caucus versus what committees versus the states they're coming from, et cetera? Where what are the correlations between their memberships?

VICTOR: A little bit. It seems to me that within the last, I don't have, maybe ten years over the last five Congresses or so, even though the number of caucuses is still growing, I think Congress has actually reached a saturation point. Whatever benefit that members of Congress were getting from being in caucuses was maxed out probably a decade ago. But I think that people are still creating and joining caucuses largely because the lobbying community demands it.

Lobbyists have figured out that caucuses are a gold mine for them because it gives them this ready-made set of legislators who have voluntarily indicated that they care about juvenile diabetes, or railroad engineering, or light rail transit, or whatever it is, and that's really useful for a lobbyist to know who their community is in ways that is more beneficial in some ways than parties and committees.

So my sense, and I don't—this is a little bit of conjecture at this point, I don't have systematic data on this point—but my sense is that most of the modern activity in the caucus community is driven from the outside rather than the inside of Congress.

CHERVENAK: That's interesting. So we'll come to lobbyists later, I hope, but on the caucuses themselves, is there any kind of financial mechanism where they get money from the Congress to have a dinner or whatever, or is it coming from outside? Where does the money flow happen, or is there any money?

VICTOR: Well, so this is interesting and perhaps controversial because technically the rules about caucuses haven't changed much since Gingrich changed them in '95. And so technically caucuses aren't supposed to have office space, they're not supposed to have staff, they're not supposed to get funding. Members aren't supposed to use their Congressional allowance to fund caucuses. That said, members have found some creative ways around these rules as happens. So for example, there's a number of caucuses, I mentioned some of them earlier, like the Congressional Black Caucus and the Fire Services Caucus and the Sportsmen's Caucus, that have set up foundations outside of Congress, and the foundation's job is basically to fundraise on behalf of the caucus and then run events and activities and programming and whatnot related to the caucus.

There's a bit of a gray area that I'm not totally clear on where it seems like some of the funding shenanigans that go on, some of the funding mechanisms, don't fully jive with like the gift and ethics rules in the House related to caucuses, and I'm not quite sure how that gets squared or if it in fact doesn't square and it just doesn't get enforced anymore. I'm honestly not fully sure how that happens because it—my very plain reading of it makes it seem like some of what goes on that is getting funded is actually in violation of the rules that were set up in the mid-'90s.

That said, there are also some members of Congress who have found creative ways to rotate their staffers on and off of running a caucus. So if I'm a member of Congress I may have a staffer who I just sort of say your job for this quarter is to run the caucus, you know, do the list serve, run the membership, have an event, whatever, and then at the end of the quarter I'm going to fire you from that job and you're going to go get hired by the, you know, my neighbor across the hall, who's then going to hire you to also continue to run the caucus, so you're going to get hired and fired every quarter from these different small handful of members who are running the caucus. So it's clearly just a skirting of the rules, but I've talked to folks that have told me about how this how this goes on, so they get creative.

CHERVENAK: And so for the caucuses in terms of the time, I mean we hear so much about members and not having any time and only being in Washington for a short period, do you have any sense for if any of them do consume a fair amount of time from some percentage of the membership? I mean, you might conclude that at least the members who were kind of shut out of real substantive committee work or out of leadership, this could be an area where they could do something. Have you seen any of that?

VICTOR: Yeah, there is some evidence for that, so there is some evidence that to the extent that caucuses are providing members some access to relationships and information and just sort of Congressional networks that are beneficial for advancing a bill or a topic or whatnot, that the lower rank and file members get more of that type of benefit than the leadership does. So we certainly see the members who haven't been in Congress very long may decide to invest in a couple of caucuses as a way of developing expertise on a topic that they want to be invested in but maybe they didn't get the committee assignment for.

That said, the longer you serve in Congress, the more caucuses you tend to join, so there is this sort of caucus participation begets caucus participation phenomenon, but again I think there's a limit, there's a—in terms of the benefit that it's providing, I think it maxes out at some point. I mean, we've got members who are participating supposedly on the books in one or two hundred caucuses. They're clearly not actually invested and spending time with all of those groups, but those cases really interest me because what are they getting out of it?

Is it just a cheap signal to their constituency that they care about pelicans or whatnot, and if that's it, fine like it's serving that symbolic political need. But when you go and talk to members about it, they'll tell you that even if the participation is very light or it's just their staffers that are going to a meeting or two here or there or getting a pamphlet or whatnot, that what they're getting is access to information on that topic that they wouldn't have had access to otherwise. And some connections with other legislators that they wouldn't have been connected to otherwise.

And that's the part that I think, those are the weak tie links that I think are beneficial, and so the work that I've done shows that members who are more central in that co-membership network of caucuses are actually more productive legislators. They actually have a higher

legislative effectiveness score relative to those that are that are less connected. It's a small uptick. We're talking about substantive effects that are relatively small but still real, still there.

CHERVENAK: Yeah, that was going to be my next question, if there's any relationship between the caucuses and legislation. Does the caucus ever kind of produce legislation through one of its members, or does it have an impact on any legislator's effectiveness? Sounds like there's some suggestion that it might have. If I join lots of caucuses, then I have a higher likelihood of being good at passing legislation.

VICTOR: Yeah, I have to say the causal mechanisms are a bit unclear because it could be that whatever drives you to join a lot of caucuses, you're just, you're a joiner or you're just interested, you're a jack of all trades, you're interested in lots of stuff, whatever it is that's causing you to join a lot of caucuses may also be a trait that causes you to be a more effective legislator. And so I can show that the correlation is there, these things happen, they co-occur, but it's not necessarily—I mean, there is some evidence, but I'm a little bit hesitant to say because there's so much causal complexity in these questions. There is some evidence to suggest that there's a small causal relationship between caucuses and sort of normatively desirable legislative behavior, but if, to the extent that it's there, it's relatively small.

But I've seen the effect in both legislative effectiveness but also co-voting, so a lot of my more recent research is looking at Republican and Democratic pairs, so I'm really interested in polarization and cross-partisan relationships, and so I also have research that shows that the more connected opposite party legislators are through caucuses, the more likely they are to vote the same way, either yay or nay, on bills. Again, substantive effects are small, but relative to those who are less connected in caucuses, they're still getting a little bit more of that bipartisan kind of benefit out of it.

Interestingly, though, to your other question about do these caucuses ever advocate for bills themselves, actually not, and in fact in some ways they're very reluctant to get involved with legislation. And this is another feature of caucuses that I find really fascinating because many of them will have a Republican and a Democratic co-chair, and if for whatever reason because of a retirement or change of interest or whatnot one of those co-chairs stops being, steps down as co-chair, the caucus will often sit idle until they can gain another of whoever, whether it was the Democrat or the Republican that left, until they have the Republican and Democratic leadership, because they do not want to appear to be a partisan group. They hold the bipartisan nature, especially of these policy-oriented or topic-oriented caucuses, they hold the bipartisan nature of those groups as one of its key attributes and as key selling points.

So, for example, if there's a bill coming to the floor on, I don't know, stem cell research, you might think that a group like the Alzheimer's or Parkinson's Caucus, the disease caucuses are actually really big, so the Alzheimer's or the Parkinson's Caucuses are quite active, really big groups. You might think this is going to be a bill they really care about. They're probably going to take a stand and advocate one way or the other. Well, it turns out exactly the opposite is true. They're less likely to get involved in that legislation because it would cause a rift, a

partisan rift, among their membership, and they value the relationship and the sort of institution of the caucus over any sort of legislation advantage that it might provide them in advocating for or defeating a bill.

CHERVENAK: What about the difference between men and women as members on the caucuses? I remember Volden-Wiseman's data shows, I think, that women are more effective legislators when they're in the minority than men are, otherwise it doesn't make a difference. Do you see any difference in activity in caucus behavior between male or female members?

VICTOR: I haven't seen much of a difference on gender or race, but I do actually see a difference on party. So it turns out Democrats are joiners more than Republicans are, and I don't really have an operating theory for why that is the case. But it, the growth in memberships and the trends and memberships seems impervious to which party has the majority in the House, so it doesn't really matter which party is in charge. The caucus network is still growing at the same rate, which to me is consistent with the idea that it's really being driven by the lobbyists and the outside forces of Congress rather than members or staff themselves.

CHERVENAK: And so is this primarily a House phenomenon, or is this same kind of thing happening in the Senate?

VICTOR: It is primarily a House phenomenon. There's a whole lot of uncertainty—the Senate's more secretive about everything that it does. There are some caucuses in the Senate, and you can, there is a little bit of information out there on them, but not nearly as systematic as we can get in the House side, so I'd have to go deep undercover and invest a lot of resources to figure out how some of this works on the Senate side, and I just haven't invested that. So really all of my study has been on the House side.

CHERVENAK: Well let's move on to what you mentioned earlier on the lobbyists, and so you've done some work on lobbying and how lobbying interacts with Congress, and we've even talked to some lobbyists on this series and get a little bit of their perspective, so I'm curious to hear what is your work in that area, what questions are you trying to answer about lobbying, and what have you found?

VICTOR: So, lobbying really interests me in part because I think it's one of those areas of government that's really misunderstood. And it's the way that it's perceived by the public is very mismatched with how academics understand the role of lobbyists in law making, and so I see it as a part of a public mission of education to continue to study, and write about, and talk about lobbyists and the role. But I think it's really complicated because members of Congress, and I think you're going to come to this lately, but they're strapped. They have to spend inordinate amounts of time fundraising and engaged in activities that we don't think of maybe as law making, and that puts this pressure on them, or this cross pressure that prevents them from in many cases being as much of a policy expert as they might like to be on a lot of topics. And they certainly can't be a policy expert on everything, but in reality in a democracy, we

should want policy to be made by people who understand it and who are experts in it and who know about it, and so the price of and the value of expertise is just very high, I think, in effective governing.

And so while Congress has a lot of resources, and they've got staff, and they've got the Congressional Budget Office, and they've got the Congressional Research Service, and the whole Library of Congress, and, there are tremendous resources, and the GAO, and on and on, it's just not nearly enough. It just does not come close to covering what they would need to cover to really know what they need to know, and the place where that gap gets filled in, kind of in a market sense, is from lobbyists. It's from people who are either, it's their sole job, or they're hired as consultants, or it's the people who are actually on the ground engaged in whatever the policy area is, who come in and advocate for what they want government to be.

And the firsthand information that they come with and the expertise that they come with is essential. It's invaluable. A twenty-five-year-old staffer or, heck, even the most experienced, seasoned professional sixty-year-old committee staffer is not going to be as much of an expert on the nitty gritty details of how policy is implemented in one niche little area because they just can't be. So lobbyists play a really essential role in a functioning democracy for being the warehouse and the keepers of knowledge and of expertise about how policy works.

And so I feel like there's an important good news story about the role that lobbyists and advocates play in our government that doesn't get told enough, and so I'm a fan of trying to break those myths. At the same time, it's not all good news. At the same time, I think we have a very complicated relationship in our very market-driven democracy with lobbyists because, of course, it comes back to the classic Schattschneider kind of perspective where, yes there's a lot of representation that's happening through lobbying, but it is not across the board representation, it's representation of those who have the easiest time solving their collective action problems and garnering resources and putting investments into telling government what it is they want government to be doing.

And that leaves out a whole swath of the population, and really important things that government can be and should be doing that aren't getting that extra bit of representation through lobbying because they just aren't as resourced and they can't organize as easily. So it's a good news, bad news thing, like I think it's absolutely the case that we are better off in a democracy with lobbying, and I mean, you'd have to cut off free speech, right, to try to get rid of lobbying. Like you can't have a democracy and not have lobbying. It's essential for its freedoms, it's essential for the representation and the expertise that it provides, but I think it's also imperative that we recognize how imbalanced it is, and to try to either regulate or control or incentivize the system in ways that can recognize that imbalance and try to either help the underrepresented voices gain more advocacy or representation, or to limit the amount of advocacy and representation that the more moneyed voices are able to garner.

CHERVENAK: And so that's kind of a high-level definition of what's happening with the lobbyists. What is your research on, and have you, is it related to these networks and how they

get networks in Congress or how they create relationships among different Congressmen? Can you talk through some of the things you found that maybe not everybody knows about what happens with lobbying?

VICTOR: Yeah, so Greg Kogar and I did this paper a few years ago where we looked at campaign contributions of lobbyists. So I mean, lobbying comes in a lot of different forms, so if I'm AT&T or Google or whatever, I have in-house lobbyists that I hire that just represent my company. And then there's lobbying firms that get hired as clients from other corporations or whatnot, and then they're sort of the freelance lobbyist. So it comes in lots of different forms, and so what we did was we looked at individual lobbyists, so regardless of whether you're just hanging out your own shingle, or you're an in-house lobbyist for a company, or you work for a lobbying firm, anybody who just as a profession identifies as lobbyists, we went and pulled the campaign finance contribution records of people who use that professional title or the title similar to them.

And we were curious, right, because in the literature, if we look at the campaign finance literature for a lot of what relates to advocacy, most corporations are giving in a bipartisan fashion. Most of the big corporations that you're thinking of that are engaged in lobbying and campaign finance often don't care who wins. They just care that they have a foot in the door with whoever does win. And so you'll see the big corporations giving to Republicans and Democrats, and more to incumbents than to challengers, and all of that sort of thing. And so we wondered if we would see the same thing among individual lobbyists, and it turns out we don't.

It turns out individual lobbyists behave like partisans and with some variance, but by and large they identify as Republican or Democrat and tend to use their campaign donations in a way that's different than their lobbying relationships, and so the incongruence there between the relationships that they develop as a lobbyist and the way they engage in their campaign contributions is still a bit of a puzzle that's still pretty interesting to me because I think of campaign contributions as just another means of developing relationships in Washington.

Relationships is what makes things operate, what makes things tick in D.C. and if you're looking at who the people on your team are, whoever your allies are, one way to make sure that you're expressing unity with your allies is to give them campaign contributions, so I see it as just another mechanism for creating and maintaining the types of ties that that people want to have in their political relationships.

Jennifer Victor - Part 2

CHERVENAK: So for this idea of, as Washington as needing networks, if you look at the Constitution, I mean it doesn't talk about that at all, right?

VICTOR: Yeah.

CHERVENAK: It's a machine, and it's a voting machine, and this concept of relationships, it's outside of any written machinery. It's an informal, human, spontaneous kind of need that everyone has, right?

VICTOR: Yeah.

CHERVENAK: It's human nature. When you look at the way networks are working in Congress, and you've done some work as well on collaboration or networks between Democrats and Republicans, for instance, what do you see as where things are and where could they go? What's healthy networks and what's unhealthy networks, I guess is a question, for Congress as an institution?

VICTOR: I really like the way you put that question because I think there's a natural tension between these two schools of thought. On the one hand, like you said, humans are naturally social beings, right? We form attachments with one another in very familial, innate ways, and so our ability to form groups with one another and to make associations with one another, nobody has to be taught. That's just inherently part of being human.

On the other hand, we also know from decades of economic and political theory that humans have a really hard time overcoming individual incentives to form collective action. And so to me there's this tension here, so is politics natural homophily? Are we naturally forming these social groups? Or are we, do we have to overcome our reticence to form groups in order to achieve political goals? And so of course in reality, it's both of those things. In reality we are on the one hand using institutions to solve collective action problems when our individual incentives are getting in the way, and on the other hand we are within those institutions that we build to do that stuff, we are naturally engaging with one another and creating connections with one another, that is rewiring the way that people are connected.

And so I see it as both of those thing. There are both of these forces working in tandem with one another, and I think the tension between them and understanding what drives that tension is particularly important. So to be a little bit more concrete about this, some of the work that I'm doing now in the book that I'm writing looks at the conditions under which Republicans and Democrats will collaborate or cooperate on things in Congress. And I'm interested in the way that the network patterns between them teach us stuff about those conditions.

And so the types of behaviors or outcomes that I'm most interested in is, when do we see trust, for example? When do we see Republicans and Democrats engage in relationships that exhibit trust between one another? We hear all the time about the breakdown of trust and the affect of polarization between the parties and so forth, but there are, there's lots of evidence of some trusting relationships, so when do we see trust?

When do we see cooperation and resilience to sort of, to use the pandemic's on everybody's minds right now, when do the network connections help cross partisans to sort of repel outside forces that disrupt their pattern of connection? So, what types of networks do we see that are

more resilient to those types of infections, you might say. And then also I think we have to rethink the way we understand power from the perspective of networks. Sometimes power is the most central person, the person who literally can pull the most levers and make the most things happen, but I think power is also found in the brokers, in the bridges, in the people who have the ability to bring opposite parties together on topics.

And they may not be the most visible folks, in fact they may try to fly under the radar, they may try to do it covertly, but I think understanding what makes a power broker effective is really important. So those are the types of outcomes that I'm interested in understanding as we look at networks between Republicans and Democrats.

And of the different types of networks that I can observe, and I guess I should pause there to say in reality, the thing that I want to observe I can't observe, like there is a true network of all political relationships, of everybody, who knows who and how, and through history, and who went to grade school together, and whose kids are on the same soccer team together, and whatever. And we just can't observe that true network of all of these complicated relationships, and we don't know its bounds.

But if we just look at the 435 members of the House and we just look at the networks that we can observe, of the observable ones, then we can understand the properties of those observable networks that I think give us clues as to the conditions under which they result in trust and resilience and power. And so I've looked at the caucus networks, as we've mentioned, or co-sponsorship, people who co-sponsor the same bills, people who sit on the same committees, so these co-participating relationships that members of Congress form.

And because those relationships are driven by these very formal institutions, they have different features, and I have, what I've come to in my work is that there are two features that make network connections the most useful for bipartisan trust and cooperation. And those two features are volunteerism and sustainability. So a caucus, for example, is a voluntary commitment. You don't join a caucus unless you want to. It's a voluntary thing, and you leave if you're done with it or you are dissatisfied in some way, so connections that are made voluntarily, whereas with a committee like everybody has to join a committee, and you are assigned to go to your committee. You don't really have a choice about that.

So voluntary connections in some ways are going to be more meaningful than involuntary ones, and sustained connections are going to be more meaningful than unsustained connections. So caucuses, except to the extent that they're very weak tie connections, are sustained over time. Committee participation, certainly sustained over time. Co-sponsorship, not at all sustained. That's a one-time thing. You co-sponsor a bill together.

So to me, looking at the nature of whether or not people are entering bipartisan relationships in a way that's voluntary and in a way that's lasting can tell us a lot about the utility of those cross-partisan relationships for normatively sort of legislatively positive bipartisan outcomes. So I think there's a tendency for people to lament about how members of Congress, they're only

there from Tuesday to Thursday, they don't hang out together, they don't live in boarding houses together anymore, they don't go to so many cocktail parties, and so on, like they're not socializing with each other. And that lack of social relationship between them impedes the legislative process, and yes and no. I think.

I mean, there is something to that, but it is absolutely clear to me through my research that the casual connections made through those just voluntary sort of one-off social connections do not at all overcome the very stringent institutional constraints provided by partisanship and committees. So I think those types of relationships matter, Congress might be better off if they had, were having more cocktail parties and spent more time with each other, but it's not going to fix Congress. I don't think it's going to make it all together a more functional institution or workplace.

CHERVENAK: I'm curious about your perspective on this network analysis, and particularly when you create a relationship between two people, you have a kind of a node in the network, and what you've identified, this idea of volunteerism and this idea of it's, obviously works better if it's repeated, and that strengthens this node, if you will. We've talked on this program in the past about the role of transparency and when the cameras are on all the time, it's hard to, at least there's a theory, that it's hard to make relationships, whereas if you're in a back room and no one's looking, then that's the time when people can actually talk to each other and they can build relationships.

VICTOR: More honest.

CHERVENAK: Have you looked at that concept at all as a potential measure of whether this node is going to take hold or not, whether there's some kind of privacy versus a transparency in the formation of these network bonds?

VICTOR: That's a really great point, and I think you're right. I think we do have good evidence that relationships or deals or connections are often more sincere or more productive when they are behind closed doors, when people aren't feeling the weight of the fishbowl on them. I don't have great data on that. I don't have with the type of data, Congressional data, that I've looked at, I don't have a great example of connections that are made in more private form.

I think there are folks out there that have that kind of data. I don't know what's being published from it, but there are organizations that are, they run these training retreats and, or actually oh, I know a good example is the CODELs, and there is a group of scholars working on this and I can't remember who they are at the top of my head, but looking at, so CODEL is a Congressional Delegation made up of members of Congress who go on a trip together. There used to be a lot of international CODELs, and maybe they were thought of as junkets, and there's still a lot of domestic ones, I think, that go on.

And they came under a lot of scrutiny as being expensive and bloated and just like a public paid-for vacation, but I think there's pretty good evidence that the relationships made while

you travel with somebody to learn about a topic are actually valuable relationships, and they can be meaningful. So the, I don't have the CODEL data, but the folks who do, I think, that would be a great way to look at, to compare that to a more transparent, I think of the CODEL as a bit more of a secretive, not totally behind closed doors, but a bit more of that private type of linkage that you're talking about relative to the co-voting or co-sponsorship kind of connection.

CHERVENAK: It might make sense for caucuses to take an increased kind of power role if, as compared with committees, since committees have become so transparent, right, and very difficult for people to talk, whereas in a caucus you can sort of do everything in a private setting, in theory.

VICTOR: No, I think you're right. I think there is the potential for caucuses to play a more private role. The fact that caucuses don't have any authority of any kind, I think probably diminishes, I mean, you'd have to ask the members of Congress this, I guess, but my guess is that it diminishes in their mind what they could do with the connections. When I've interviewed members of Congress and staffers about the value that they see in caucuses, or the waste of time or whatever it is, what I mostly hear about is access to information that they wouldn't get otherwise and access to relationships that they wouldn't get otherwise.

But I don't hear a whole lot about how it helps them to advocate for something that they couldn't advocate or make progress with something or kill something that they were trying to kill or whatnot. So in terms of a private setting that can help create more functional relationships, I think you're right, but in terms of something that might then, like the jump from that to translate into legislative productivity, I feel like there might be a step missing there.

CHERVENAK: Great. Well, maybe it's time for us to move on to some of the questions I ask all of our guests to see if we can compare the answers in the future and see where people agree and differ. So, you ready to move on?

VICTOR: Yeah, I feel like this part is the test.

CHERVENAK: The first question is the hardest one. What do you think Congressional representation should mean?

VICTOR: Yeah, that's really hard. So I think representation is a really challenging topic, and because we live in a very diverse society that is growing and getting more diverse every day in lots of different ways, and our understanding of diversity and what it means to be human and how we identify in different categories as humans is still changing. So I'm not sure that there's like a code or a recipe that we can put on, like a quota system that Congress would be truly representative if we had filled these particular buckets in these particular proportions, because we just never know exactly what the lineup of buckets needs to be because that definition is changing all the time.

So in a way I think there is some hard and fast almost rules that we could apply to some representation. If there are very defined, visible populations in the United States that have, are underrepresented in Congress, you think of maybe a population like Native Americans, or those with disabilities, that are—or you can think of children. There's lots of populations that are plentiful in the United States that have either zero or very little real descriptive representation in Congress. And when we see that, I think we need to think about that and what are the ways to address that, if there are logical ones, because the research on this topic suggests that under some conditions quota systems work.

Like if there are big, underrepresented populations and you create gender quotas, for example, like they've done in India, in some places, you get more representation of women, for example. I think the limits of using that type of forced representation system are real. I don't think you can use that type of system forever, and I think it's, I think you have to use that type of system very carefully and strategically. So then the other side of the coin is how much of representation is just whether or not people feel represented, right? So I am an over-educated middle-aged white woman. Do I feel like a Black male high school graduate could represent me well in Congress?

Well yeah, depending on how that person stands on issues and what their, how they talk about things, and if they're, if I feel like that person is representing me in the ways that I want to be represented, then absolutely. So at some point it comes down to whether or not people feel represented. So descriptive representation is important, and I think we need to pay attention to it, but substantive representation is paramount in that sense. So I don't know. I'm filibustering this a little bit because it's such a hard question.

CHERVENAK: Well let's—I want to take a little bit more of the view of the Member or of the Senator. So if you're a Member, you're a Senator, who do you represent? Do you represent, and this is your, a personal opinion that I'm asking for from you, is, do you represent the people who voted for you, do you represent everyone in your district, do you represent, that's the first question is who do you represent, and the second question is how. But the first question is who.

VICTOR: Yeah, I think there's no question that you represent everybody in your district. I think if our representatives were only representing the people that voted for them, then I think that really skews our sense of representative democracy.

CHERVENAK: Or if they just represented their primary voters, that would be even worse.

VICTOR: Yeah, that would be even worse. The how is really hard, though, because the how suggests that, it suggests a preference aggregation that is unrealistic, so if I'm a member of Congress and I have 750,000 constituents, and my goal in representing those 750,000 people is to figure out what they all think on bike lanes, or rapid transit, or whatever it is I'm being asked to vote on that day, it's just not possible to know that, and it's not possible to know it not just because I can't go around and ask all of them all the time, but because they will not be of one

mind. It's not like there is a consensus to be known. Not just that it's a hard thing to know, but that it is unknowable because it doesn't exist.

So the mathematics without going too far into the weeds, the mathematics of Arrow's Theorem is really compelling. So you get into a large group of people. By large, really, I mean more than three, and you ask them to tell me their rank order, your preferences over five things, or much less 100 things, and you're going to get cycles. There will be no consensus over what the preferred outcome is, and so I think that puts the onus of representation on being thoughtful about what maybe you think those 750,000 people think, but also with the understanding that they are not of one mind, and even if you could poll all of them on Tuesday, they'd come up with a different answer polling them on Thursday.

CHERVENAK: Well, there is a question of whether you need to do that at all, so there's two minds about that kind of representation. One is, are you reflecting just the beliefs in some kind of aggregated form, a majority belief kind of system where you come into all the problems you just mentioned, or whether you are of the opinion that the representative is, makes his own judgments about what he thinks is in the best interest in the long term of his district, and so those are two different approaches. I'm curious where you fall down on those.

VICTOR: Yeah, it's the classic trusty or delegate kind of perspective. And this is why I think that we probably don't spend enough time in politics talking about values, and at the end of the day if I'm a member of Congress, I can't know what all my constituents think, but I can explain to them what my values are, what drives my value system, what my priorities are, what norms, Democratic norms or whatnot, I think are most important to follow. And as a voter, I think voters need that information. I think voters need to know what the guiding principles are that people are, that their representatives are following, because at the end of the day that's what's going to help them make decisions, is those values and of course the relationship they have with their party, rather than their individual opinion on any one topic, which is probably not all that important.

CHERVENAK: What it sounds like from the way you described earlier is that you think a Member should reflect beliefs of his or her district if they're known, and if they're not—

VICTOR: I think they're unknowable, so—

CHERVENAK: You think they're unknowable, so you move to the judgment version of representation out of necessity.

VICTOR: That's a good way to put it. Yeah, that's a decent summary of my view.

CHERVENAK: Okay, great. Next question is, how would your ideal Congress allocate its time, and this means in D.C. versus home versus legislation versus oversight. So how would you break it down?

VICTOR: Yeah, so I think we, I think members of Congress have a really important job, and we send them to go do that job, and so I think they should spend most of their time in D.C., and I think they should be, in an ideal world, members of Congress have law-making responsibilities, oversight responsibilities, representation responsibilities, and there's a fourth one that I always tell my undergrads that I've just lost. It's like four main jobs and I'm blanking on the fourth one. Let's just go with the three, then.

And so I'd like to see a Congress that is engaged in those three or four, whatever the fourth one is, things most of the time, and that can come in a lot of different forms, but if they're spending roughly 25, 30 percent of their time actually doing lawmaking, actually legislating, advancing legislation, killing legislation, advocating, writing, whatever, learning, I think that would be positive. Another 25 to 30 percent of their time engaged in oversight would be great. It would elevate the function of Congress to its designed position that it's not really fulfilling right now. Another 25 to 30 percent of its time engaged in representation. That can come in lots of different forms. That can come in meeting with Girl Scout Troops or going to cocktail parties or giving speeches or serving on panels or whatnot, anything representation behaviorally can come in lots of forms, but it should be a public and visible and an accountable kind of thing. That's what I think they should be spending their time doing. Unfortunately, I don't think they get to spend much of their time doing those things.

CHERVENAK: So it sounds like mostly D.C., mostly legislation oversight.

VICTOR: Yeah. Yeah.

CHERVENAK: Great. So next question is, how should debate, deliberation, or dialogue occur or be structured in Congress?

VICTOR: I think that depends on what purpose or outcome we're going for. If we're just talking about debate or deliberation with respect to a new issue that has arisen, a new problem that Congress needs to address, maybe it's not something that we're sure Congress needs to take action on, but they need to know about or they need to learn about, I think that could come in a lot of different forms that could be both educational and dyadic in terms of producing dialogue between members.

But if it's something that requires action or we're deciding whether or not maybe we need to act on something and we need to pass a bill or whatever it is, where there's a much more specific target involved, I think that type of dialogue requires a lot of structure. The Robert's Rules of Order, the rules that parties and committees develop to structure dialogue I think create stability, right? So to me the trade-off in the way that Congress can organize any group really is having a lax structure that allows for more free flow and more creativity and more probably innovation and contributions from sources external and so forth, which can be really good for general problem solving or general learning, versus a system that will produce outcomes, that is stable. So the really structured system with lots of rules, that is stable, that

will produce outcomes, is not going to be the one that is best for innovation and creativity and all of that.

And so there's a trade-off, I think, between the two systems, and I think it would be great if Congress had access to more of both of those things and could have designed spaces and formats that would facilitate one versus the other. I absolutely think we have to have, when we need to actually pass bills to solve society's problems, we have to have structure. Without a lot of rules that govern the way that process works and the way people participate in that process, it will never reach conclusion, it would be a chaotic constantly overturning itself kind of mess.

And so if we want stability and we want outcomes, we have to agree to restrain ourselves to, in the debate in order to produce it, but I don't think that means we need to always do that. Sometimes we can have debate just to have debate. We see the Senate doing a lot of that. It used to do more of it, I think, now than it does, where it's more performative, but having spaces where people can feel comfortable in a free-flowing dialogue maybe outside of public view in that more private space, as you were talking about earlier, I think can have great value for, again, innovation and creativity and sharing perspectives.

CHERVENAK: And do you think that kind of freewheeling part of it, the unstructured part of the discussion, would that be more in committee, would it be in your caucuses, where would it, would it be at a bar? Where do you think that should happen?

VICTOR: I think any of those are possible. I mean, of the ones you just mentioned, the committee is going to have more structure because committees actually do sometimes have to produce outcomes, but I think if committees have the option to close their door and have a discussion or invite in witnesses in closed-door settings for the purpose of giving everybody the sort of freedom to say and do what they want, I think that could be really productive.

It could also be seen as corrupt or inappropriate in the public's eye, so I think you have to be careful with that kind of stuff because perceptions matter, but creating safe and private spaces for members to interact with one another I think is valuable, and I don't think they have enough opportunity to do that kind of kind of thing. But I think it's really hard to create. We live in a social media world, a 24/7 media world, where everything is scrutinized, and lots of politicians do lots of stuff for the purpose of cajoling that media, so I think it's really challenging to figure out how to create that kind of space.

CHERVENAK: Agreed. So the next question is about what institutional, fundamental institutional improvement you would make to Congress within the next 50 years.

VICTOR: Great. I like this question a lot. So I think that we are as a democracy in the United States at a pivotal point. I think we have seen some degradation of democratic institutions, and we have a stringent political party system that sits on top of a Constitutional checks and balances system in ways that are incompatible with one another and that are, place so much constraint on the system that it's not operating.

Essentially, I think the framers built a series of compromises in the Constitution whose purpose was to prevent dominant factions from overtaking the government, and that operated like that for a little while, and then parties were born and operated on top of that. And so parties are a constraint, and then the checks and balances and all the rest of it are a constraint, and so what we have now is so much constraint that we have much less functionality, which is giving the Executive Branch greater authority and relative power to the Legislative Branch, which is not the design, right? That's, in fact, less democratic in a sense.

And so, what I would like to see is reforms that would make Congress resurgent, that would make Congress more the primary branch of government over the Executive Branch, that, so more specifically, I would expand the size of the House considerably, maybe 750, 850, consider doubling the size of the House. And you move to multi-member Congressional districts so that with more seats and multi-member districts and then to elect those multi-member districts you would need a different kind of ballot system, so let's get rid of first pass and post, and I think there's other, lots of other good options out there, whether it's ranked choice voting or some other alternative in that vein, but with those three reforms you would essentially break up the two-party system.

You would create the conditions for multi-partyism, which would have a lot of, it has some downsides, but it also has some huge upsides, and the most important upside is that I think you would increase that sense of representation. We were talking earlier about the sense of, do people feel represented, and do they feel represented by people who don't look like them. In a multi-party system, many more people are much more likely to feel like they are represented by somebody or have representation by those that they are more satisfied with, rather than being forced into the two partyism. I think that would be not, you don't have to amend the Constitution to do those things, you do have to change a couple of laws, but I think it would be absolutely transformational for U.S. democracy on the House side.

On the Senate side, I don't know, it depends on how radical I'm feeling. The most radical version is to simply get rid of the Senate and move to a unicameral. The Senate—I say this as a former Senate staffer, I did that fellowship in the Senate for the year, and as a, the Senate has a lot of wonderful qualities, but it's hugely unrepresentative in ways that I think are problematic for the democracy. So the most radical thing would just be to dispense with it.

The less radical thing would be to think about state representation, to think about moving away from the two senators per state rule and maybe not, I don't know, there's something along the lines of a more House of Lords version of a second body that doesn't quite have the same legislative authority as the lower chamber but still has some check and some heft and some gravitas and some representational benefit to it. What exactly that would look like, I don't know. I think in reality none of that will happen, but I do think it's nice to think about it. If we're going to keep the Senate as a as a true bicameral functioning part of Congress, though, I do think we have to either significantly reform the filibuster or get rid of it all altogether because it has just, not in terms of its rules, but the norms by which it has developed over the years have

just become so constraining on the legislative process that it just has a way outsized influence on what Congress can do in a way that I think is detrimental.

CHERVENAK: All right, next question is, what book or article most shaped your thinking with respect to Congressional reform?

VICTOR: Oh, wow, I actually didn't know this question was coming, although I should have. Hmm.

CHERVENAK: So many books.

VICTOR: Yeah it's too, it's really too many books, so I'm going to cheat and say the first two that came to my mind, although if you want to peg me into one, that's going to be a problem, but the first two that come to my mind, just things that I've read in the last five years or so, are "Democracy for Realists" by Chris Achen and Larry Bartels that I think is one of the things that I've read in the last five years that really changed the way that I think about what the purpose of democracy is, what the purpose of elections are, what the fantasies are that we believe about it, and how to get a little bit more pragmatic about what a democracy is and how to run one.

And then Lee Drutman's book about the two-party doom loop and democratic reforms that that we could—I think Lee does a really nice job and a very accessible job to a broad readership in thinking about it, and both describing the literature and what we know scientifically on the topic but then also in in proscribing what types of reforms might affect some of those problems. So those are the two shoutouts I'll give there.

CHERVENAK: Great. The last question is an easy one. What are your future plans? What do you have in store with your book, and what do you have coming in the next five, ten years?

VICTOR: So, my big goal is to finish writing this this book, so the conditions under which members of Congress collaborate and work together from this network perspective. So, and the book is a little bit more ambitious in terms of offering political scientists a network-oriented framework for understanding politics, so the title, the working title, of the book right now has to do with emergent politics, that politics is a network feature that emerges from the nodes and edges, from the connections within the network, and so all the outcomes that we observe, whether it's election outcomes, or legislative outcomes, or whatnot, are really just the product of the way that relationships get formed in politics.

And my little working map in my head of emergent politics, for me at least, provides a way to reconcile this idea of, are humans naturally social, or are we natural individualists that have a hard time overcoming our collective action dilemmas, and helps me understand how and when and why we can expect those politics to emerge. But it's a really very data-oriented project, and so in addition to the book I'd really like to have some type of public web portal that, where folks could come on and type in an issue, or a member, or a committee, or whatnot, and get a

visual map, a visual network map for, again we can't observe all the connections, but we have lots of observable relationships between members of Congress.

And so if you want to know more about scientific disease research and what Congress is doing at it, you type that in and it would provide you the network map of who are the most central players who are those bridging players that are creating the brokerage between Republicans and Democrats, who are the ones that are, how are the clusters forming differently in the communities in the network. So a database that has a very visual, very descriptive front end to it that in my mind could be really useful to either a casual observer of politics, or an advocate, or a journalist, or a student who just wants to better understand how things tick and why things happen in Congress.

CHERVENAK: Awesome. Well, professor Victor, thank you so much for your time. It's been a pleasure.

VICTOR: This has been a great conversation. Thank you so much for inviting me to play along with you.

CHERVENAK: Thank you.