

Lisa: Hi, I'm Lisa Hernandez

Britah: And I'm Britah Odondi.

Lisa: And we are your hosts for this episode of Scholar Strategy Network's No Jargon. Each month we will discuss an American policy problem with one of the nation's top researchers without jargon, and we can't get more American and more policy than the U.S. presidential election in the coming, oh my gosh, weeks because it's already here and it is daunting and exciting, and a lot of different feelings are involved with it, but we're also excited to have on the pod, an expert within our own organization of SSN, our voting and elections associate. Britah, welcome to the pod.

Britah: Thank you so much for that welcome. I am so excited that I could be joining for this special edition right before the election period. As you said, it's exciting, it's daunting, and this month's episode touches on all of that.

Lisa: Absolutely. And you know, I think a lot of us are feeling really confused and we wanna learn more about, like our process and what the experts have to say about that. So I'm really looking forward to hearing from the expert that you spoke to.

Britah: So for this month's episode, I spoke to Paul Gronke, who is the director of the Election and Voting Information Center at Reed College. Professor Gronke has dedicated his career to advancing voting access, protecting voting rights, and promoting safe, secure, and accessible elections. He's partnered with government agencies at all levels, nonprofit organizations, foundations, and voting rights advocates. Here's our conversation.

Britah: Hi, professor Gronke. Thank you for coming on the No Jargon podcast.

Paul: Good to be here. Thanks for having me.

Britah: I am really looking forward to discussing the challenges and complexities of the upcoming presidential election, particularly around how we ensure transparency and safety in the voting process. But before we dive into the specifics, can we give our listeners a little background on your work? You've been studying elections for decades now. What first drew you to this field and what kind of work do you focus on now?

Paul: You know, my, the first phase of my career was, I guess, what you would call the conventional way that a lot of scholars, political scientists thought about elections for a long time.

Which was we would use national survey data mainly. A lot of it was collected at the institution where I received my Ph.D., the University of Michigan, the national election study would be released every two years and political scientists would line up like we're all at a track meet and we'd start to sprint and try to understand the election that had just occurred by looking at these survey data.

And then many of the listeners may remember, some may not remember that. The 2000 election between George W. Bush and Al Gore was really kind of a seismic event in American politics and in our democracy. But for a lot of scholars as well, there was this realization. We sort of knew it, but there was this realization that there were these state and local officials that were so key and foundational for our democracy.

We really had not been paying much attention to what was going on at these state and local levels. So I really pivoted my career, frankly, at that point to turn away from working primarily with survey data and started to turn toward election administration, working with and supporting state and local election administrators and trying to understand what they were doing.

And just to close the answer, what really changed me was uh, my arrival in Oregon. I had spent a couple years in high school here in, gone back to get my Ph.D., and the first part of my job was at Duke University in North Carolina. So I come back to Oregon in 2001, and this very odd thing happened. A ballot arrived by mail and I filled it out and returned it, and I thought, well, that was interesting. There's no polling place. How does that change the way elections occur? That turned me toward becoming an expert and studying voting by mail. Then it became early voting and suddenly it grew into this whole research frontier on election administration.

Britah: As someone who's been researching this for years. What have been some of the most significant changes you've observed in terms of how elections are administered in the U.S.? I know technology plays a large part in that, but what are some other significant changes including technology that you've seen?

Paul: I think one of the most significant changes that really everyone's experienced. It's impacted many of the scholars who are associated with your network. But really it has impacted everyday citizens, election administrators

and campaigns, was a piece of federal legislation called the Help America Vote Act that was passed in 2003.

That piece of legislation was in response to the problems that were identified in the 2000 election. And some of those people may recall were hanging chads punch card machines and voting technology was viewed as, had kind of fallen behind learning that had occurred in many other places, in the economy and technology and other areas that we wanted to move beyond these mechanical ways of recording ballots to try to move, to take advantage of technology. But another part of that legislation was to require every state to create statewide voter files that the records that are kept of individual records, registration records, and voting histories. Those were sometimes collected at the state level, but in other cases they were collected by counties or even by townships and municipalities. So that legislation was meant to sort of systematize that process in all the states.

Now whether this was expected or not, but what really happened after that was this kind of suddenly for every state, we only had 50 files that collected voter histories for all of the eligible citizens in the United States. And very quickly a political organization moved into this space to sort of assemble that information and then push it back out to political organization.

So you had a very accurate record of who participated, who did not participate simultaneously with that political scientists, other scholars, most notably Donald Green, who was at that time at Yale University, now at Columbia, but other scholars as well, realized that you could take advantage of this information to use what are called field experiments, campaign mobilization experiments so that you would expose a certain sample a random subset of the population to a certain kind of appeal and not others.

And you could get really good leverage on voter turnout. And that really created the groundwork or the foundation for the kind of vote mobilization revolution occurred in the 2000s. And so that really has been a very substantial change where we turned away from relying primarily on surveys of a thousand to 2,500 people, and we began to work with these voter files. Really ultimately 150 million, you know, records of names of individuals who are eligible and began to turn toward these administrative records that really are more and a more accurate measure of whether people participate or not than we would ever get from a survey.

Britah: Thank you so much for that. You've provided us with a better understanding of the shift from the early 2000s with the Help America Vote Act

and how the public really began to pay more attention to how the election system operates. In addition to that shift, currently your elections and voting information center conducts annual surveys of election officials. What are some of the trends you've been able to identify over time and what has been surprising or even concerning in the latest report?

Paul: Absolutely. Thank you. And again, I want to, you know, bring the listeners up to speed on this. So you put yourself back in 2000, 2002, this realization that local election officials had quite a bit of autonomy and authority about the way elections are conducted. So there were a series of reports that were commissioned by the Congressional Research Service to try to understand these local officials, sort of what their work environment was, who they were and what their challenges were.

That research occurred in about a six or eight-year period. So there was this realization about a decade later, myself and a number of other scholars realized, look, we haven't learned anything about these officials for 10 years, we need to start to explore again and try to understand what's going on, particularly after 2016.

Again, to remind the listeners 2016, the big concern in 2016 was cybersecurity threats from foreign actors. And it wasn't clear that local officials had the capacity or the technological tools in place in order to resist these cybersecurity threats. That was sort of the prompt to begin to survey these officials.

Really, it was driven by what had happened in 2016 and had these, this community of officials adapted fully to these kind of new changes. Things that you and I are used to every day, like a dual authentication. These are kind of new in this space, these cybersecurity protections. So, we commissioned this survey, asked a series of questions found out frankly, that they were quite prepared to adapt to these threats.

But the surprise in many ways at that point was that the demographic composition of this community had really not changed since 2002, 2004. The community of local election officials was still predominantly female, 75 to 80%. The average election official is a 55-year-old. White female earning around \$50,000 a year with some college education.

So even over this, decade or 15 years of enormous change in the democracy space, in the election space, new technology, new demands, new expectations, new scrutiny nationally and locally. the community itself had really not budged in terms of who took on these roles.

So we began to follow up and try to understand how they, how they felt about their roles, did they embrace these kind of new demands that were placed on them. I wouldn't say so much a concern. I wanna really focus on the positive first. We have found then, and growing over time an increasing embrace of this role as what we call stewards of democracy.

Where when I first started to work with election officials around 2008 or nine, started interacting with them a lot. There was sort of, I wouldn't wanna say a rejection of the responsibility for turnout, but officials will tell me, look, turnout is not my job. My job is to have an election that can be certified and is completed. My job is to sort of complete this administrative role.

But over time we have found more and more officials embrace the role of educating citizens, communicating with citizens, trying to increase turnout, even though many of the forces that drive turnout up or down are outside of control of local election officials.

It has to do with demographics, it has to do with campaigns, but officials recognizing that, look, this is part of my responsibility to educate, try to get people to the polls. So that part, that's the good news. The bad news or the less good news, let's put it this way, is an increasing number of officials telling us that they are receiving threats and harassments you know, that they don't share with friends or neighbors anymore what they do, that you know, they've had to take on these new responsibilities they've had to have active shooter trainings. The kinds of things that I think in some respects they don't feel like they signed up for.

They're ready to have a safe and secure election in 2024, but it feels like there's sort of a fragile foundation below and that, you know, more and more officials are just saying, look this just ain't worth it. There's other jobs in local government that have a lot less stress. You know, I'm, I'm not on video here, I'm smiling. This is not meant to be a joke. Many are finding a move into law enforcement. They work for sheriffs or local law enforcement because it's less stressful. So running elections is the stressful job, working in law enforcement, less stressful. We've gotta wrap our heads around that and understand what this means for our democracy.

Britah: Thank you so much for going into that detail and with the threats and the harassments that they're facing. That is something that didn't seem to be a major concern, let's say a decade ago. In your opinion, what has changed? What has been the catalyst can you describe some of the challenges that you know they're facing these days, specifically threats and harassment?

Paul: Yes and no. That's a really big question, and we only have an hour or two. Yeah, this is why we need video, so you can see me smile. So I wanna say that, put a broad context around this, an area where scholars, many of which are associated with this network, have done such good work. So it turns out that turnover among local officials of all types has been increasing over the last 20 years.

That yes, there was a spike in turnover and retirements and departures from the field after 2020, but the spike itself was on top of a slow growth in turnover that has been going on for 20 years. There's a report out of UCLA Daniel Thompson, who's an assistant professor, and Josh Ferrer, a graduate student, had been doing really excellent work, assembling information over time.

There is this important question about is this just a response to 2020? It does appear that there's a response to 2020, but there's something deeper going on in our society and our democracy where individuals, political actors, sort of feel like there are no barriers anymore, or there's no, what's the word that when we're driving on a high, there's no the, thank you, yeah, the guardrails have been removed and people think it's okay to issue a threat or call up and harass local officials. So there is something going on, with school board members, members of local law enforcement, government workers of all kinds, are reporting higher levels of threats and harassments that are directed at them.

But to go back to the local election officials, yeah. What's going on there is that particularly elections, the rhetoric has become supercharged. And, the kinds of things that are said have gotten toxic. And so what officials are telling us is that you know, they, what they love about the job is it's fast moving.

There's always change, there's always another election on the front. And a lot of folks said, well that sounds really stressful. But you know, there are individuals who embrace that kind of fast-moving environment. That's what people love and they recognize how important this work is. I think what leads to frustrations in some departures is that, as a whole, the field continues to be underpaid relative to other comparable positions in local government. There's something historical here that someone smarter than me needs to research. Perhaps I'll end up doing it.

The gendered nature of the work where that came from, I just believe that it has something to do with the term clerk and clerical, and that's association with women's work. We're well beyond that, but the work just has not received the respect and the funding that is needed from both local authorities and state authorities. And that has led good people in the field to just say, look, I don't

need this. I can still get the same benefits and retirement and other things at other areas of local government and not have the president of the United States, mentioning my name and suddenly I have to move, or leave my home on election day because I'm worried about people appearing outside my home.

So you know, I am really honored to be able to work with these officials. I always start my conversations with them by telling them, thank you for your service and how much I hope everyone appreciates the work that they're doing. And I try to ask them as a scholar, say, what can I do to help you? Not what can you do to help me, but what can I do to help you? Because it is so vital and so important that this work continues.

Britah: Yes. thank you so much for going into detail about the workforce and what keeps them motivated despite the challenges that they're facing. One area that we cannot quite skip over is the Stop the Steal movement that came out of the 2020 elections many people genuinely believe even up to this day that the election was stolen, even though there's no evidence to support that. How do movements like these impact not only the public trust in terms of elections, but also the safety and the morale of these election officials themselves?

Paul: It, it's just very corrosive, it's corrosive for officials. It erodes the sense of ethos and community that they have. To be perfectly frank, it's hard on scholars and researchers and others working in the field as well. To be constantly having to counter the sort of exact same misinformation and the big lie that you've been trying to counter for years.

And, you know, you get another call from a journalist or someone to say, Hey, this person is coming through town again. They're making these claims. I said, well, yes, that's been debunked. That was debunked four years ago. Three years ago and two years ago, and at what point you are like, look, you know, do your homework and go back and look. This is a, it's a well-funded effort, it's a political strategy to undermine faith in our democracy.

Most, if not all the election officials I've dealt with welcome public scrutiny. They welcome the public. Their experiences have been even among folks who are skeptics when they come in and see how elections are conducted, a lot of that skepticism goes away. So, you know get away from whatever sort of information source that you're relying on or social media influencer and go to The officials themselves are really experts in the field.

That part of the work, I think they find rewarding. They like dealing with the public. If they like helping people exercise their franchise that's where the

rewards come in. Again, I don't wanna sound completely negative. There is very good work being done about communications that election officials and others can convey that move the needle on trust. So I think there are possibilities there. But it's gonna take some work. It's gonna take work not just by scholars, not just by election officials, but by elected officials, schools, other civic leaders.

Britah: We need to get away from the negativity and try to celebrate our democracy and its successes. And with a point that you touched on in terms of thinking about communication, trust, the messaging behind how elections are conducted, and how the system is working properly. When I look at the U.S. system, especially as someone who's recently moved from one state to another, it is quite decentralized in nature whereby each state, it has its own laws, its own practices, deadlines, and so forth. To many people, especially people who are not as motivated to participate, it can be quite complicated. Do you think this decentralization contributes to the challenges we face or are there benefits to our system?

Paul: Can you stop asking such hard questions?

So, yeah. Yeah, but that's exactly the right way to describe it. I think the decentralization has benefits and some costs. The benefits are that when you hear claims that the election was stolen or you know, the stop this steal movement, they're just not credible because of that vast decentralization.

In order to, for example, you know, I have particular expertise in voting by mail, absentee balloting, and have been asked about. Well, like, here's this example of, you know, an examples of absentee ballot fraud that occurred in a local jurisdiction. I'm like, okay, you've identified, say 10 absentee ballots, but that's in one jurisdiction, there are 10,000 jurisdictions. You've gotta do that process 10,000 different times without being noticed, and we notice these things, in some sort of coordinated way that no one sees.

So decentralization is a big advantage because it really does make it extremely hard, if not impossible to sort of hack our system as a whole. But the decentralization does mean that individuals won't move between jurisdictions and between states and encounter these different systems. Election officials are working on that. They coordinate at the state level to try to roll that information out.

It's gotten a lot better because this is a case where technology has really helped. Where there are websites where individuals can easily identify what their registration status is. Most states have some sort of ability. What? 40? I think it's

48 states at this point. 97% of the population are in states where you can track the progress of your ballot.

You can confirm that it was accepted received and validated. That is if you mail a ballot, of course, if you go in person you could see it happen right there. So yeah, the decentralization means that you face a different system in each state. That's just an ongoing conversation that really we've had since our founding about where authority should reside.

I think where we are right now is that states are attempting to systematize and sort of have an equal experience across a state. But I don't think we're ever gonna get to a point in the United States where we have national election management bodies. Has existed in many other countries where you're really running elections through a national, it just, it's not gonna happen in a federal system like United States.

Britah: Well, thank you for focusing on the positives or the benefits of having our system being decentralized, but also going into the solutions should there be an instance or any type of occurrence where a question is raised. Now shifting us a little bit, with the election day, it seems as though tensions are going to increase as we get closer and closer to the state.

But you've had experience, you know, speaking with local election officials, visiting their offices, having an understanding how their individual systems are working, how prepared are local election officials for potential unrest during and after the actual election process,

Paul: Law enforcement at the state and federal level recognize what's going on. And I think officials are ready for the security threats widespread unrest after the election. You know, I don't know if anyone is ready for that and I hope we don't get to that point.

I will say that the resources are in place. You know, the other thing I think that officials are ready for, they're ready for a very competitive election. There are a few hotspots in the United States where I have concerns. I think other experts in the field have concerns. These are mainly states where the laws have fallen out of sync. What I mean by that is that they may have expanded access to absentee balloting, let's say voting by mail, but other parts of the law that deal with ballot curing your ability to come back and fix an error with your signature or something with your ballot that that period of time is relatively short.

Because in the past, a state may have had five or 6% of the ballots come in by mail, and now suddenly they're up to 30 or 40%. One example that is in the news right now is that the state Board of Elections in Georgia passed rules that ostensibly will require local election boards in every county in Georgia to hand count ballots to confirm the number of ballots that were counted match what the machines have processed. That's simply not feasible. It's gonna take a very long amount of time. And guess what? Humans make errors where computers don't. So that's the kind of change that is potentially gonna cause great problems in Georgia, which is a battleground state.

And we hope that the election will not be waiting for results from one or more Georgia counties where individuals are sitting, you know, in a room at two or three in the morning counting ballots and the counts keep not lining up because they're very tired. So I think that's where the concern is more, is that when laws and processes have fallen out of sync and election officials' hands are tied, Suddenly there's massive scrutiny because the election has not been we don't have a final outcome. So that's, I think, where the worry is, this kind of that, you know, suddenly the spotlights are on one county or one jurisdiction in a very small number of states. That allows for ammunition for people to sow distrust.

Britah: And it's very insightful to know that there are organizations working on supporting election officials, should there be a need both on election day and afterwards. But I also wanna focus on having you know, as our listeners, sometimes. We may be unaware of what election officials are truly going through. How can people show support for election officials? I know there is an election here day coming up on Monday, November 4th. But what are even some small gestures from the public that could make a difference?

Paul: Scones. I've brought baked products to my local officials. Now don't do that unless you know them. Yeah, that's really a wonderful question and I really do appreciate you saying that. If you are involved in social media, I. There is hashtag Election Heroes is coming up, hashtag Trusted Info 2024, or just hashtag Trusted Info is a hashtag that many will use to try to promote you know, information from trusted sources.

You know, unfortunately X or Twitter has removed what used to be a blue checklist that was, that election officials had, that identified them as trusted information providers through social media. I would say figure out where your state and local officials are disseminating information. And share that information within your networks. Whether those be, you know, verbal pointing people who may be skeptical to say, Hey, here's our local official. They have their video feeds of the count. Here they're showing you what's going on.

Identify what the websites are, where your local officials and state officials are releasing the results.

Share those with friends and neighbors. You know, I said before, it's not something that everyone's going to wanna do, but if you do have questions, email your local officials, go down to the office. Every local official is obligated as a public official to welcome the public coming in and learning about their processes. You know, connect with other organizations, school organizations you know, other groups that you may be affiliated with in your local community, and encourage them to connect with local officials. Local officials really do love their job and love to share with people what they're doing.

And through these other organizations that you're a member of, you can kind of leverage and amplify their message and sort of get it out there to counter the misinformation that is still sort of percolating around, you know, all around us.

Britah: Thank you so much for that. In terms of, I know you jokingly said scones, but as a, as a person who used to work on a college campus, there was nothing better than like donuts for democracy or pizza at the polls. So food.

Paul: These are great. Yeah, I like this.

Britah: Food definitely does go a long way, but it is important to remember you also can play, or the public can play a part in terms of those hashtags that you shared with us for trusted info if you have a question, contacting your local election official using social media as a positive way to also reach out and spread the correct information as well.

Paul: I just wanna say one thing about that, Britah, is that we are, being pummeled by information that is coming to us via these networks that may not be trustworthy. And it's hard to navigate this world where both foreign and domestic actors and now through artificial intelligence tools are generating this information. I tell anyone on social media, understand that there are algorithms that are designed to get you to react emotionally to the information that you're receiving. So sometimes I tell folks, view everything with skepticism. Really come in with a critical eye. Listen to podcasts like this and understand you need to be critical.

But when you do identify a source that you know is trustworthy, like a local election official, that's the kind of thing that you should be promoting. And I have to say, almost anything else that you see about election procedures, about election counts. You need to view it with a critical eye. I've been in this field a

long time. I know who the trusted actors are. there are organizations out there that are trustworthy, but if you don't know, what I would say to anyone is. Don't repost it. Don't send it out unless you've checked. And if you have any question, just don't repost it. you just don't know the credibility of the information that you're receiving.

Unfortunately, that's the world that we're in right now.

Britah: And in terms of the information and the myth and disinformation that is so. That is, you know, has grown at an incredible rate. When thinking about like implications and the current trends, what do you think the long-term impact will be if all of this continues not just for this election, but the stability of future elections?

Paul: The trajectory is not good if we continue down this road. it would be helpful if some political actors would leave the political scene. And that political campaigns based on sowing misinformation, the distrust were no longer effective.

You know, there's a lot of very smart people working on this, but you know, the alarm bells are sounding. Younger generations are expressing lower levels of faith in democracy as a form of government. I think we need to take a hard look as a society. Over some of the changes that we put in place, over the last 30 or 40 or even 50 years.

We've sorted ourselves into sort of political enclaves that's not healthy either. There are some major reform efforts out there. Our geography and our constitution and our political institutions are sort of interlocked in a way right now that is magnifying our differences.

And I don't know how we move beyond that. I've seen very good proposals. I wanna say that I've seen very good proposals. Erwin Chemerinsky, a law professor at University of California Irvine, I believe you know, he's calling for a new constitutional convention. That seems like a big thing, but there are big problems.

Lee Drutman is a very influential writer, political scientist who's promoting more proportional election systems that would not allow parties and, you know, hyperpartisan actors to have hammerlocks on both state and local offices. we really need to have a serious conversation about how we can move forward.

So yeah, if it continues in this way, it's not gonna be good. But I do think there are enough folks who recognize. The problems that we're facing right now and there's positive solutions out there. We just need to come up with a political will to implement some of them. A lot of the activity, frankly, is happening at the state and local level where innovations are occurring.

We need to percolate those up to the national level. And I, you know, I think there's a path for progress. I do, I feel optimistic. But yeah, we, we need to not have another January 6th. That was really bad and we don't wanna have that again.

Britah: And I love how you, you were able to bring it all together and, and let us know along with our listeners, that there really is a path towards progress, A path towards, a democracy where everyone is participating, where elections are run, you know, free, fair, and they are accessible to. All those who are able to participate, and thank you for sharing your insights, Professor Gonke, I hope our listeners come away with a better understanding of the complexities involved in running elections and how they too can support local election officials. This truly has been an eye-opening conversation.

Paul: Thank you so much for the opportunity.

Britah: And thanks for listening. For more on Professor Gronke's work, check out our show notes at scholars.org/no-jargon.

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