

4-30-2017

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Recommended Citation

Romero, A. 2017. Jones studies the condition of American politics. *College Talk* (21):1-1. 30 April 2017.

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Jones studies the condition of American politics

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

There are many reasons why people decide upon a career. Some follow family tradition, others seek careers with the potential for a big paycheck, still others are inspired by a particular professor in college. But in certain cases, something more mundane explains how a person arrives at such a momentous decision.

“I grew up in a family where, every morning as I was eating my cereal before going to school, the radio was on with the news,” says Dr. David Jones, a professor and Chair of the Department of Political Science at the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences in Baruch College of the City University of New York.

“I was raised in a household where paying attention to current events was the norm, and I kind of thought that that was the way every household was. The more you listen to current events, the more you realize how much our lives are affected by government and interactions between government and citizenry. I was just always fascinated with it, and it seemed natural to me. It was more confusing to me why other people didn’t feel the same way,” says Jones.

A native of Summit, New Jersey, Jones obtained his bachelor’s degree from Haverford College in Pennsylvania and his master’s and doctorate from the University of California, Los Angeles.

He has devoted his professional life to studying politics in America, a subject that is as hot today as it has ever been. He says that the electorate is savvier than most people assume. “If people aren’t paying attention to Congress, they don’t know what’s going on there, how it can affect their votes or their other attitudes. My research, interestingly, found that people are able to use shortcuts to make some assumptions, reasonable assumptions, about what’s going on in Congress. People are smart enough to figure out who’s in charge in Congress and to hold that party accountable, and that was something interesting I found in my research.”

Does that mean that our democracy is healthy?



Dr. Jones at his office.

For Jones the responsibility does not lie only with politicians. “I would say that, from a personal perspective, I don’t like to see people complaining about what’s going on in politics if those same people didn’t inform themselves, didn’t show up to vote. You had the opportunity to have an impact and have an effect, and if you chose not to do that, then you lose your right to complain a little bit,” he says.

About the current confrontational state of politics in America he is very clear. “We are in a period when politics is very closely contested. The two parties are of roughly equal strength in the American population. Republicans are in control of the White House and the House and the Senate but really only by very small margins. There are people looking ahead two years, and it could go the other way. Whenever you have an electorate that is so evenly divided like that,

you’re gonna have a few instances in which the popular vote might not match the electoral college.”

One problem that has been mentioned is that of gerrymandering, i.e., drawing electoral districts in ways that favor a political party instead of reflecting the will of the people overall. “A lot of the rules are left up to the states, so different states have taken different approaches to this. New Jersey, for example, has a bipartisan commission with an equal number of Democrats and Republicans that drew their districts. In some states the legislature gets to decide how the districts are drawn,” says Jones.

Another contentious issue is the filibuster, or the ability to block legislative action even if you don’t have a simple majority, something that was recently abolished by the Republican-dominated senate when approving the latest Supreme Court appointee. “The

most positive thing to say for the filibuster is that it’s a protection of minority rights and minority preferences. It is important that in a democracy the majority should rule but also that they should be respectful of dissenting opinions. The filibuster can play a reasonable role there,” he says.

Another issue that he sees a problem with is the notion of ideological purity required by some partisan elites. “When no ideological purity is required, it’s easier to see some commonalities with people across the aisle and to socialize with them. Ideological purity occurs when political elites start to sort themselves out by clear ideological lines rather than traditional geographic lines and other reasons. Then citizens start to notice, and that starts to affect the citizenry. Citizens view each other as being in different camps.” Jones sees this ideological sorting as a malady perverting American politics.

Many American and even international observers wonder how someone who won the popular vote can lose the presidential election. “The closeness of American politics means this divergence can happen, but what we really want to know is what went wrong in states like Pennsylvania, Wisconsin or Michigan. We don’t want to oversell and say that the polls are broken, that they didn’t work. Actually, they did a better job than they’ve done in some previous years.”

Jones acknowledges that the press played an influential—but flawed—role during the last election. “A lot of journalists didn’t appreciate the fact that they were just focusing on who was ahead and who was behind and ignoring the point that maybe eight percent of the public waited to make up their minds until the last minute.”

Jones goes further: “I think that if the election had taken place the week after the *Access Hollywood* video, Hillary Clinton would have won fairly decisively. I think that people have a short memory, and that it’s what’s going on right now.”

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College of the City University of New York. The radio show on which these articles are based can be watched at: <https://vimeo.com/207179898> He can be contacted via Aldemaro.Romero@baruch.cuny.edu

Photo by Yulia Rock