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INTERVIEWER: After the 2016 US elections, Rob Blair, a political scientist at Brown University's Watson Institute, began to devise a new course designed to answer a question that was suddenly on many people's minds. Is our democracy failing? The course was adopted by 19 other universities and is being taught again this year. In August, Blair and others organized a conference for instructors and students involved with the course. But let's back up and find out how the whole thing started.

ROB BLAIR: The idea really originated with some casual conversations that I was having with some colleagues here at Watson in the Political Science Department, really just thinking about-- we had read a lot of the quite alarmist headlines about the threat to US democracy that Trump posed, and also, the threats to democracy that seemed to be manifesting in a lot of different countries around the world. And we were worried and also confused. And I think we genuinely didn't know what to make of all of those warnings.

And so we were just talking about what could we do from our rather privileged position as faculty members here to try to contribute in some small way to understanding the nature of the threats that we may or may not be facing, and then if we are, in fact, facing threats, to try to counter them in some way. And so I floated the idea of maybe we could get a bunch of universities to teach the same course.

And we played around with that idea little bit. And my colleague Jeff Colgan and I actually ended up writing a blog post, just sort of throwing the idea out there. And somewhat to my surprise, it turned out to generate a lot of interest. And we ended up ultimately with 19 universities over the 2017-18 academic year that taught some version of the course.

Some of them taught the whole, basically, identical 13-week syllabus. Some of them taught a sort of modified version for a particular interest that they had. And some of them incorporated just four to five weeks of our material into syllabus for a course on related topics.

INTERVIEWER: And they're accessing this on the website that you created, Democratic Erosion.

ROB BLAIR: Yeah. So basically, so we have, as a group, we have a shared folder that we use. So we lesson plan together. We devise the syllabus as a group. And then now, anybody who joins,

we basically give them, right off the bat, we give them a syllabus that's sort of a plug and play. Just put in some dates to match your semester, and you've got a syllabus ready to go.

We have lesson plans for every possible course type. So we have discussion questions if it's a seminar. We have slides for lectures, if it's a lecture course. We have group activities. And these were all devised, the different faculty, each contributed their ideas and their lesson planning. And so now, really, the hope is that people can sign on and it's very, very easy to just take the course and run with it.

INTERVIEWER: And why is it important to apply social science to this question? Why is it important to be addressing students, and not just each other?

ROB BLAIR: You know, it's very tempting to answer this question about the state of democracy in the US and the potential threats that we're facing, to answer it from a purely partisan perspective. And we really wanted to avoid that. We wanted to treat this as a genuinely empirical question, to try to ask ourselves in a serious way, are these threats real? Are these warnings valid? Should we be worried?

And if we should, then what can we do about it? And if we shouldn't, then why are we all so worried in the first place? And we thought that engaging students was important in part because of the reactions that we were hearing from students in the wake of the election.

Alienation was a real recurring theme of this election, people who ultimately voted for Trump feeling alienated by the political process, by the parties, and gravitating towards him for that reason. And then when he won, people on the left really feeling alienated because of the tenor of the campaign. People who belonged to certain minority groups or who felt that something about their identity had been denigrated in the course of the campaign. And you can really feel that when you talk to students.

And so we wanted to create something where the students and the faculty, as well, could feel like they were part of a bigger conversation, and an inclusive conversation, one that was serious, but that was not partisan, one where we were just-- let's come together as a community of people with genuine intellectual curiosity and serious concern for what might be happening to our democracy. And let's just think about this in as systematic a way as we can.

INTERVIEWER: But you're doing more than just thinking about it, right? Aren't you producing case studies and sending them to NGOs and the State Department?

ROB BLAIR:

Because of the multi-university nature of the course, there were a couple of different cool projects that we were able to do to, sort of exploiting the economies of scale. Rather than giving our students-- having them do reading responses or that sort of thing, they wrote for our blog where they would analyze current events through the lens of the readings that we had given them for class. And students from all the different universities participated in that.

And then they would comment on one another's posts. And we then use that as a vehicle for creating some continuity over the semester. So the best posts from fall of 2017 were required reading on the syllabi for spring of 2018. And the best posts from spring of 2018 will be required reading for this coming fall.

We had a contest with the Social Science Research Council where the very best posts, the four best posts from the whole year, were published as part of their Democracy Papers series, which has essays from some of the leading luminaries of Political Science, and our students' names just right alongside. We had our students write country case studies. This was the capstone project, if you will. So all the students wrote case studies on countries that had recently experienced some form of backsliding, democratic backsliding.

And then Texas A&M, Jessica Gottlieb, who teaches in the Policy School there, she and her master's students took all those case studies and use them as raw data for an analysis on the symptoms and causes of democratic erosion, which they then presented to USAID and the State Department and a consortium of over 20 NGOs that are doing democracy promotion work in DC. That happened in May.

They're now working to turn that into a publicly-available data set that we can use to communicate with the policy community to do actual research with this data, and thinking about other kind of cool deliverables that we can give to policy folks that might be of interest to them.

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INTERVIEWER:

What made you want to take this course in the first place? And did you foresee it taking on these proportions when you first signed on?

SUBJECT 1:

So I was really interested in the course because in school, I had studied a lot of democratic theory and those big philosophical questions, but outside of the classroom. A lot of my work

had been on political campaigns. So I was very much in the weeds of you don't get to take a big macro perspective because every decision you have to make has to be about how are we going to win, and in that sense, sort of advanced democracy because you believe that the candidate you're working for is somehow good for the country.

So when I saw this course after the election, I was really interested in engaging both of those things at the same time. I wanted to be able to take a more macro viewpoint on big questions of democracy, but in an engaged way. And that's what appealed to me was the ability to apply these big concepts, both to the United States and to entirely new countries and situations that I hadn't really studied before.

So when I got to do my case study on Mexico, or even write a blog post on a political event that I helped run on campus, I got to take the experiences that I'd had building campaigns, talking to voters, and seeing what actual people think about democracy, and then understand how those interactions had fit into larger frameworks that political scientists and other people had conceptualized about democracy, and that we weren't just part of some small project in Rhode Island's first congressional district, but actually, similar things and experiences were happening all over the entire world with different results, and compare them in a way that I hadn't been able to do before.

SUBJECT 2:

I'm studying political science in the Philippines, but my area is really development. So I got the idea that why do countries develop way better than other countries? I'm talking about political development and economic development. I wasn't really thinking about democracy in a highly sophisticated way because democracy, to us, would mean going to the polls to vote.

I didn't know that there are varieties of democracy, that we can be more sophisticated in approaching the concept. And we can do a lot of indicators that we can use to judge whether a country's already declining, in terms of its democratic practice. And a lot of learning has been added to me, a lot of insights that I can use, if, for example, I really want to link development and democracy.

I also learned from my case studies that it can be cultural. There are societies that somehow allow their leaders to be authoritarian in the most pressing issues that they face. We have to do housekeeping first before we can really look at the political aspect of democracy.

So it's more of, like, Duterte's war on drugs. So a significant portion of the population thinks that it is acceptable because it will do a lot of housekeeping for us. For us to be more

developed, we have to address our problems first with drugs.

And there are also other factors that can also affect the direction of the democratic practice of a certain society. Like how the foreign policy is being pursued by leaders can really affect the direction of-- I mean, can really affect how they're going to be. Are they going to exercise authoritarianism or going to pursue more democratic practices, depending on the kind of alliances that they pursue? So for us, like for the current administration where they're sort of pursuing an independent foreign policy, which means that they're going to pursue more alliances with nontraditional allies, like China and Russia.

INTERVIEWER: Do you find yourself comparing the situation in the US democracy with the situation in the Philippines, or are you making global comparisons or no comparisons? Is there any value to a comparative approach?

SUBJECT 2: There's always a tendency to compare, especially when you want to come up with a meaningful analysis, like an empirical analysis of democratic decline or democratic stability, especially if I want to focus on the international system as the cause, as one of the causal factors for democratic decline.

INTERVIEWER: What do you mean by that last point, the international system being a causal factor in democratic decline?

SUBJECT 2: I haven't encountered much literature about pointing the interstate affairs as a causal mechanism to explain democratic erosion. But in one of the blog posts I've written, I talked about how the FDI or investments coming in from China can actually synergize the tendency of Duterte to pursue authoritarian tendencies. Because of the money pouring in, that money can be used for patronage, distributing favors to political allies that might support him in his policies.

INTERVIEWER: Have you found that democracies, our democracy and other democracies around the world, are, indeed, eroding? Are their findings yet that you can talk about? Has this enlightened you, and has this made you hopeful or despairing?

SUBJECT 1: Well I think one way to avoid the question is to say that in the course, I found it valuable that we learn to be more precise about the language we are talking about. When people make these big claims that Rob was talking about, in terms of what inspired the course about how democracy is dying, but the sort of comparative nature of learning about all these different

countries, as you can see, that that means different things in different places. Democratic decline in the United States might mean increased polarization that hurts political discourse. It might mean candidates making outlandish statements that wouldn't have been culturally acceptable at a different time period. But democratic decline in a different country--

INTERVIEWER: Like Hungary, or--

SUBJECT 1: Yeah. Could mean completely undermining, say, in Poland, the judiciary, and like reducing their independence. It could mean assassinating a political opponent or engaging in a massive corruption scandal. So I think that there are certainly cases in the United States that we've learned about in the class and just through my own research about how a culture of polarization is undermining faith in democracy and how incarceration practices are contributing to massive amounts of disenfranchisement that you could easily argue are eroding the fact that democracy is about popular participation. But at the same time, there's so many other things happening in other countries that you have to be more precise and clear about what examples you're talking about.

INTERVIEWER: Are you able to take the class again? I can't imagine that just after a year you wouldn't want to keep delving and keep doing the research and sharing your findings.

SUBJECT 1: I mean, together, with all these different people and different perspectives, this is a way to make sure that the scholarship is really engaged, and it wasn't just a purely intellectual exercise. We're brainstorming ways that could actually be practical solutions for promoting free speech in a democracy, things like that. And that's why this is a good continuation for me.

INTERVIEWER: Has there been anything for any of you that's taken you completely by surprise, that you didn't foresee, whether it's what you've found out or how this has unfolded or the-- I don't know-- the level of interest?

ROB BLAIR: We found this at basically across the universities that students end up coming out of the class much more optimistic than when they came in. We did some follow-up qualitative interviews with students who took the class and comparable students who didn't, just to try to see how their perspectives changed over the course of the semester. And I think it's by virtue of thinking about the longevity of political institutions in the US that that seems to produce a lot of optimism in our students.

And, also, I think that comparative perspective turns out to be to be really important. When we

think about Donald Trump, we tend to get very sloppy in our thinking because we're partisans. We think about nepotism in the Trump administration. And we think, oh, nepotism is such a problem for democracy. This is just like Poland. And so we point to these cases that are really problematic, and we forget that another country that has really serious problems with nepotism is Belgium.

So maybe we're becoming Poland, or maybe we're becoming Belgium. And one of those is a much worse fate than the other. Or libel laws, Trump says he wants to strengthen libel laws. And we really don't have libel laws in the US. And we think, oh, well, if he does that, we'll be will be just like Venezuela. But another country that has considerably stronger libel laws than the US is the UK. So maybe we're becoming Venezuela, or maybe we're becoming the UK.
[LAUGHS]

INTERVIEWER: Interesting.

ROB BLAIR: I'm not saying that there's no risk in the US. I'm still quite worried. But I do think when you put things in a little bit more context, it does allow you to pull back a little bit and see things a little bit more clearly. I hope, at least. That certainly has been the goal. And I think for our students, I think that really worked.

SUBJECT 2: I agree with Rob when you said that we should take time to really think of the political questions that we are analyzing and facing. And the course practically gave me that tool in order for me to have that framework of understanding what is expected of a democratic leader. So you are provided with sorts of lenses to really analyze different types of leader behaviors, and not really politicize it or prejudge it, as they are already doing something to change the Constitution, according to their interests.

Emerging trend in analyzing democratic erosion is also how is it hidden, so how the leaders have been tapping those informal channels to aggrandize power. Gone are the days when authoritarian tendencies can be framed when there's a military coup. So the more challenging aspect of studying democracy and democratic erosion would be how it is veiled, how this sort of camouflage into something that is benign, when, in fact, it's already affecting the society negatively.

INTERVIEWER: Well, we're about one minute from when you need to be back in the conference. Is there anything that you'd like to add? I don't want to keep you from doing all this good work.

ROB BLAIR: Well, I'll just add this project has been immensely fun and rewarding and very illuminating, really, to lead over the last year. And I've benefited enormously from all of the efforts of all the other faculty. It really has been a group effort. And from these students who have engaged so seriously, it's been so wonderful having international participants, as well.

We're continuing to expand next year. So we'll have more universities joining the roster, including Ben Gurion University in Israel. So we'll keep expanding internationally, as much as we can, and pursuing new cool collaborative research projects, and really, try to make this into something that can be a vehicle for teaching, but also, for research and for serious civic engagement. I'm very excited to keep it going over the next year.

INTERVIEWER: Well, thank you for doing something so innovative and enlightening. And thank you for bringing all your energy and your brains to it. It's really been fascinating to talk to you. I wish we had more time. But thanks for coming in and letting us learn about your project.

SUBJECT 1: Thanks for having us.

ROB BLAIR: Our pleasure. Yeah, thanks for having us.

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