

John Boccacino:

Hello and welcome back to the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. I'm John Boccacino, Senior Internal Communications specialist at Syracuse University.

Gretchen Coleman:

I'm really curious, and this comes kind of my past background working in elections as well, is the voter information side of things or the voter education piece essentially because we have the voter ID laws and while I wish that we could change them, that will take a couple of election cycles to hopefully fix. But in the meantime, we have people who need to be able to get to the polls and taxpayer ballot and make their voices heard. And key to that is making sure that people are aware of the ID requirements, so if they have an ID, they can bring it with them to the polls. But also if they don't have an ID that they know about their options to be able to get an ID. For example, in the UK if you don't have an ID, you can apply for a free voter authorization certificate or something like that. But so few people have applied for them so far that that's not going to end up in franchising the people who need to be able to get out there and make their voice heard.

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Our guest today on the 'Cuse Conversations podcast is Gretchen Coleman who earned her bachelor's degrees in both political science and political philosophy in the College of Arts and Sciences and the Maxwell School from Syracuse University in 2022. She is currently pursuing a master's degree in political science, democracy and elections at the University of Manchester overseas in Europe as a recipient of a Fulbright postgraduate award. The Fulbright US Student Program is a really prestigious program. It's both an academic and a cultural exchange that partners with 140 countries around the world to provide and fund study and research grants. And Gretchen Coleman is one of those proud recipients from Syracuse University. We are thrilled to have you on the podcast, Gretchen. How are you holding up these days?

Gretchen Coleman:

I'm doing great. Thanks so much for having me.

John Boccacino:

My pleasure. Hopefully the introduction did a little bit of a justice as a teaser for what we're going to talk about on the podcast. But I want to start with a very basic question for you. How are you loving studying over at the University of Manchester?

Gretchen Coleman:

It's been a great experience so far. Definitely a bit of an academic change from what I'm used to with the US education system. But I love being in the UK and I love getting a chance to look at politics from a new angle. In the US, we tend to focus pretty closely on US politics and it's nice to get that comparative perspective.

John Boccacino:

I'm glad you're enjoying your time over at the University of Manchester. This is a pretty prestigious program, both the Fulbright scholars that we have here at Syracuse and the Fulbright postgrad program. How did you become interested in this in the first place?

Gretchen Coleman:

So I definitely owe all the credit to the Center for Fellowship and Scholarship Advising at Syracuse. So I was working with Jolynn from CFSA as early as my freshman year to apply for a bunch of different awards, but more than just applying to get scholarships and fellowships and that kind of a thing, working with CFSA really helped me kind of crystallize and clarify what my career goals actually were. So just I had this vague interest in what politics is and I was able to distill that into something of how could I actually go make change in the field of politics? And I definitely wouldn't have done that, at least at the stage that I did without working with Jolynn to write down my ideas and pitch them to someone to pick me up on that opportunity.

John Boccacino:

And we'll talk about both your undergraduate research and your master's research, but part of your program over at the University of Manchester is studying voter identification laws and comparing the voter ID laws in the US with the United Kingdom, which is just instituting this for the first time coming up. How does one become interested in that subject?

Gretchen Coleman:

So like most young people who are interested in politics, I started working on a campaign because that's a really good way to put your foot in the door and not make a lot of money. So actually the summer before I started at Syracuse, I was working on a campaign for my local state representative back home in Illinois. And she ended up losing that election by just 43 votes, which was a little bit heartbreaking because like 40,000 people voted in that election and we could have knocked on 40 more doors. But actually, so the recount process ended up taking so long that when I was back home for Christmas my freshman year, I got to observe the recount and so went into the Cook County Clerk's office and saw them counting the ballots.

And as much as I hated the results of that election and wish things could have been different, I had full confidence that all of those votes were counted correctly. And so that kind of helped me change gears from realizing I liked being in politics and working on the political party side of things, but my real passion was really just the non-partisan election processes and trying to get people to believe in their elections and trusted democracy and get as many people to participate in them as possible. So that got me more into the election side of things. And from there, I've learned more about election administration and that's how I got into the research I'm doing today.

John Boccacino:

As someone who does have this as an area of pursuit of their passions, it's obvious we've seen a rise in what you want to call election distrust when it comes to people not believing the results of elections. And we're not going to take partisan sides here on the podcast, but I did want to get your take on the rise in doubting the results of elections that we're hearing and seeing about recently.

Gretchen Coleman:

I think that is probably the biggest issue that we're facing with our democracy and probably will continue to face for the foreseeable future. And so that is actually something that I worked on with my undergraduate thesis at Syracuse. I was interviewing young people to figure out how much they trusted in elections and I feel like that's just become even more salient of an issue in the months since I even finished that thesis. And what I think is really fascinating is to some extent, it doesn't matter how well

run elections are, which a lot of them are run very well and we have full reason to be able to trust in elections, but the fact of the robustness of an election isn't going to convince people to trust it.

It is a more deeply rooted thing that you could be influenced by family members, by a political leader that you like, by misinformation. And if that sits with you, that's the reason you're going to trust your distrust in election. So I think when we figure out how to get people to buy into elections, we have one, have the really good research out there to say that this is an election you should trust. All of that is really important, but we should recognize that that's alone aren't going to do it. We have to have some level of, I guess, empathy for people who have misinformation about elections to get them to trust it as well.

John Boccacino:

What else did you learn from talking to students and the rest of your research base about what maybe manifests when people think about election results and not being completely accurate based on what they're told?

Gretchen Coleman:

I think a huge part of it was partisanship. I didn't get the chance... At the student level, it's really hard to get equal number of both Republicans and Democrats, but it was really interesting to see the really stark partisan differences. And I think that that is something to consider going forward. The different messages will resonate with different parties and if we want to get everyone to trust the elections, which we do in a legitimate democratic system, we have to make sure to address those messages accordingly.

John Boccacino:

Do you find, in the time you've been in the UK, has there been anything regarding mistrust of the information of the electorate results that you've noticed there comparable to what we've seen in the states.

Gretchen Coleman:

I haven't been in the UK for in an election cycle yet. They have an election coming up in May, so I'm really curious to see where that goes. But the thing that I've noticed that pertains really closely to the research I'm doing now is along the voter ID laws that they're implementing. So in England specifically, in the elections coming up this May, it's going to be the first time that voters are required to show an ID when they go vote at the polls. And I think that the reason that those policies are happening in the first place is because of the mistrust.

The electoral commission, which is the big nonpartisan body in charge of administering elections, they put out a report saying there basically aren't detectable cases of voter fraud. This isn't an issue. Essentially, don't implement voter ID because there's not a problem that requiring ID would solve. And then the parliament went and implemented voter ID laws anyway, which is really following closely to what we've seen with voter ID laws in the United States where they don't actually go make elections more secure and they end up disenfranchising people, which is the big issue that we have to face. So again, it is kind of like that balancing fact versus people's partisan goals with election administration.

John Boccacino:

So give us a little more insights then, Gretchen, into what exactly your research entails when it comes to voter ID laws.

Gretchen Coleman:

I'm really curious, and this comes kind of my past background working in elections as well, is the voter information side of things or the voter education piece essentially, because we have the voter ID laws and while I wish that we could change them, that we'll take a couple of election cycles to hopefully fix. But in the meantime we have people who need to be able to get to the polls and cast their ballot and make their voices heard. And key to that is making sure that people are aware of the ID requirements. So if they have an ID, they can bring it with them to the polls, but also if they don't have an ID that they know about their options to be able to get an ID. For example, in the UK if you don't have an ID, you can apply for a free voter authorization certificate or something like that.

But so few people have applied for them so far that that's not going to end up enfranchising the people who need to be able to get out there and make their voice heard. And so I really think that it is on the government and it's on political parties and it's on anyone who has a stake in getting people out to vote to bridge that information gap and to let people know about their options for IDs and all of that. And that's not exactly what I've been seeing. I think that there are going to be some gaps in who is letting people know about the new voter ID requirements. And that's kind of the angle that I'm coming at this with.

John Boccacino:

And then with the fact that you are, again, over in the United Kingdom at the University of Manchester with elections coming up in May, how do you plan on boots on the ground studying the election lead-up and then the aftermath to pertain back to your research?

Gretchen Coleman:

So still trying to finalize the methods a little bit, but I'm really curious in kind of analyzing the actual materials that are being put out to let people know about ID requirements, whether that's a government website or social media or mailers sent to people's houses, people who don't have access to the internet, trying to figure out exactly what's feasible for me to analyze. It'll definitely be looking at that. In terms of election day itself, I'll be putting on a slightly different hat and I'll actually get the chance to be an election observer for the election. There's an organization in the UK called Democracy Volunteers that organizes this huge domestic election observation effort. So I'll get to go for 7:00 AM to 10:00 PM or whatever it is on election day, running around to as many different polling places as I can to collect data for that organization on how these polling places are being run. And they're going to put that into a report to talk about how the UK could improve their elections.

John Boccacino:

It's fascinating and I'm so happy you'll get a chance to be again there on the ground to take all of this in, to contribute, to put your research into practice. I just want to get a sense, do you have any inclination... I know our country, there could be a lot of voter apathy sometimes, especially at the local levels where you struggle to see strong turnouts. With the elections in the UK coming up, do you get a sense how passionate they are about voting in their local elections and their national elections?

Gretchen Coleman:

It's interesting because I have the perspective of, I'm trying to talk to a lot of people who are working in the election space and they're really trying to mobilize people about voter ID and they're terrified about what's going to happen and they're trying to do as much as they can to let people know about IDs and

they're preparing for this worst case scenario. And then I'm also talking to my classmates or to other people that I meet just in the city. And they're vaguely aware that an election's going on because just like in the US local elections don't get nearly the amount of attention that they should. And so I have been seeing some... They'll put up billboards. The Electoral commission is funding this big public awareness campaign that says, "Remember to bring an ID." Which hopefully will get people to realize that an election is happening at all. That's definitely not enough to... People aren't necessarily seeking out the information they need to remember to bring an ID with them or even to go vote at all.

John Boccacino:

As part of the Fulbright postgraduate award recipient program that you're a part of, how did you wind up at the University of Manchester?

Gretchen Coleman:

So when I was researching Fulbright options, again, this is all working with CISA Syracuse, I basically just looked at all the different universities that had Fulbright awards in the UK. And then there were a couple different ones that had a democracy themed program, which is something that I haven't really seen in the US, so I was really excited with those options. And then did my research and decided that Manchester would be the right place for me. And so far, it definitely has been.

John Boccacino:

This is also a pretty cool cultural exchange too, to go from Cook County Illinois to Onondaga County in central New York to now United Kingdom. What has been the biggest way your cultural perspective has been broadened by being overseas?

Gretchen Coleman:

That's a good question. I think even just in conversations I have with either my classmates or the knitting group I joined, just anyone that I'm interacting with in the UK, I think it's their just understanding about other countries and other cultures just feels just on his face a little bit broader than what I've seen in the US. I think I said at the beginning of this conversation, in the US we really tend to focus on the United States and on US politics and US culture. And I feel like people in the UK know a lot more about US culture than I thought, but also just other cultures from all around the world. Manchester is a really international city, so it's really cool to learn more about not just people from the UK but people from all over.

John Boccacino:

You mentioned that the Europeans and the people in the United Kingdom seem to be more aware of what happens over here than what we are of what's happening over there. Are you finding that there's a misconception that's held about say US elections that you've unearthed from the foreign perspective? Do people think that everything is chaos and misinformation and fake news, or what are their thoughts on how the elections have played out here?

Gretchen Coleman:

I think that their biggest take on US elections, especially from the people I've talked about in the election observation space is just how partisan US elections are. So not even just that people are really, really polarized, which they definitely are in the United States, but even in the election administration

itself, the people that you have running elections, your secretary of states in many states or even your county clerks are all elected. They're partisan leaders who are in charge of running elections. Even when I was a poll worker in Illinois, it was one of those people running the polls on election day and they wanted to have one Democrat and one Republican in every precinct because it was a really partisan atmosphere. And that's just something that is unthinkable to people in the UK where they have this big nonpartisan watchdog group in charge running elections.

John Boccacino:

Now I know mention you mentioned, Gretchen, that this dissertation, again studying and comparing the voter ID laws in the United States and the United Kingdom, that's just one part of your master's experience. What else are you trying to get out of your experience over in the United Kingdom? What are some of the other classes you're taking and how else do you hope to advance yourself holistically through this experience?

Gretchen Coleman:

Another goal that I had for my academic program was a focus on quantitative skills. That's something that a lot of people pushed me to do in Syracuse and I probably should have done and just never really got the chance because I was so just so wrapped up in loving my political philosophy degree. But I really wanted to get that kind of quantifiable application to political science. So I definitely have been seeking that out. I'm learning [inaudible 00:16:16], which is a little bit over my head at times, but I'm really glad to be embracing that. Doing some of the more nitty-gritty data analysis.

John Boccacino:

How do you want to use this moving forward? What are your career goals and ambitions off of this program and this line of research?

Gretchen Coleman:

I have, for the past couple years, been really interested in anything related to election administration and getting more people out to vote. So I've been trying to explore that from a lot of different angles. And then through this master's degree, I really loved doing the research side of things. And so now I'm hoping to combine those moving forward into my career to do some election policy research. So looking at new election laws and how we could fix election laws so they are less discriminatory, more representative of the people. And then doing the policy research to shape those laws and inform policy makers ultimately, hopefully advocating to get those laws passed and implemented.

John Boccacino:

You really are so close to so many other different countries and you get a chance to study and hear what's happening. And included in this is the European Union and NATO. And you recently were part of a really cool seminar as part of Fulbright where you got to go to Brussels. Tell our audience a little bit about that experience and what that was all about.

Gretchen Coleman:

So I just got back from Brussels a couple days ago and it was the most amazing adult field trip essentially that I think you could ever possibly go on. So it was organized by the Fulbright Commission in Belgium and Luxembourg and they invited people representing other countries with Fulbright grants all across

Europe, which fortunately for an EU focused seminar, they decided to include people from the UK even in the post-Brexit era. Was very grateful for that. Basically took us around to go meet with leaders and ambassadors, embassy officials from a bunch of different organizations who are part of the EU or NATO. So we went and saw people from the US missions to the EU and NATO, went to the European Court of Justice to go hear a case argued, which was a fascinating experience.

Just all of those kinds of things packed into four days. And what was also really cool is to meet the other Fulbrighters from across Europe as well because everyone has some kind of unique research angle that they're pursuing or doing really cool teaching work in their countries and it was really cool to connect with them and to see how Fulbright has shaped their experiences as well.

John Boccacino:

What do you think it was about yourself, your research and your candidacy that stood out to merit this?

Gretchen Coleman:

So when they were inviting Fulbrighters in the UK to apply for this and to make our case that they should select us to go, it was a callback to all the days when I was working on all these fellowship applications at [inaudible 00:19:06]. I had to put it together in just a couple of days, so grateful for those skills. But it helps me reflect on what I was hoping to get, not just with that specific seminar but also the global perspective more broadly. Because I'm usually so focused on US elections, sometimes it's really easy to forget how much you can learn from how other countries run elections.

And so that's something that I keep reminding myself to do with the UK and I'm fortunate to be able to do with my dissertation. And then for this seminar I got to think more broadly about democracy on the supranational level. So not just voting in your country's local or national elections, but in the EU you get to vote for your members of European Parliament so you have someone representing you up above the national level, which is something that in the US we don't really experience. So I really wanted to see how the democratic legitimacy and the political participation of a big organization like the EU holds up. And fortunately was able to pitch that to the UK Fulbright Commission, and they thought that that was pretty convincing too.

John Boccacino:

You've had a lot of experience studying elections, you're going to be participating in the UK elections coming up this spring. I believe you've observed or will be observing elections in Northern Ireland and the Netherlands as well. Is there anything you've observed when it comes to how democracy and how these elections... What are some of the biggest similarities with how we do the elections here in the States compared to these European countries and what are some of the biggest differences that you've noticed?

Gretchen Coleman:

I'll start with the differences because I think those stand out the most. I think the big one for the US is the amount of technology that we use in elections. In the UK, everything is done still on pen and paper and everything is hand counted. And the US, we have these giant machines which have done this. Source of a lot of controversy in the US but are also seen as innovation, the way that things are moving. And that's really interesting to compare. I think also in terms of what that means for trust, and again, back to trust in elections, but the US machines that we have are really well run. We have really robust certification and all of that, but people, they don't see... Their ballot goes in the ballot box. Even if they

print it out and put it in themselves, they don't like the fact that they have to print it out. And I think there's a lot of distrust there.

And so I think as we're thinking about election reform in the US we have to think both about what is statistically, logically, factually going to result in a more trustworthy election, but also what do people actually trust in practice? And we have to kind of bridge those two things because we need to have well run elections. We also have to make sure that people just innately trust in the results as well. I guess what I'm seeing in terms of the administration of elections and how similar they are, even though I think that what it looks like when you show up to the polls on polling day might look pretty different between the US and the UK.

Even the source for my research of having a comparison of voter ID laws in the first place means that the US and the UK are following really similar trends in terms of how the administration of elections is going. I think that if the US hadn't had this history of voter ID laws that are discriminating against people, then the UK probably wouldn't have implemented those laws themselves. And I think realizing that and working on that path going forward is reminding me again and again how important it's to get that comparative perspective, because the issues that we're seeing with elections definitely don't happen in a vacuum.

John Boccacino:

Now I'm glad you mentioned perspective because I do want to give you a chance to talk about just your perspective on how fortunate you feel to be where you are thanks to Fulbright. How surreal is it to wake up and realize that you're over at the University of Manchester and you're really living out your dreams from the research perspective?

Gretchen Coleman:

Just so much gratitude every day. I think it's sometimes hard to process. It's like, "Wow, I actually really am here and have this opportunity." Even in the everyday things, like that I am fortunate to have my tuition covered and a living stipend so I can really focus on research and focus on getting to know people in the UK and the things I'm really passionate about with the luxury of just having time to think about big research questions and to travel and explore. That's something that I will never take for granted because it is really just so meaningful.

And in terms of some of the specific opportunities that Fulbright provides and just being in that situation to go pursue whatever you're passionate about, I got to go on a random impromptu private tour of the House of Lords when I was at a democracy conference in London. And the whole time it was like, "Why am I here?" The concept of the House of Lords was something that I still don't fully understand and that I was getting shown around by a lord who was really passionate about election reform and was agreeing to meet with activists in the election reform space. That was boggling to think about.

John Boccacino:

That's so cool to hear. And again, I'm glad you're taking advantage of all the opportunities that are afforded to you as part of this program. Now, speaking of opportunities, you mentioned that you're from Illinois and you already got your bachelor's degree from Syracuse and you're working on your master's as well. What drew you to Syracuse in the first place?

Gretchen Coleman:

Part of it was just that my college advisor at my high school in Illinois said he knew some women... The Syracuse admissions office was like, "I think you should apply there. They have a good political science program." So I wanted to go to school on the East Coast and that's why I applied. But then after I applied, I got invited to apply for the Coronat Scholarship, which is a full tuition merit scholarship for the College of Arts and Sciences. And through that application process, they flew us out, back in the day. I think now they do the interviews on Zoom, but they flew us to campus to go interview and to meet other prospective Coronats and to get to know Syracuse. And from there, I just totally fell in love with the school and the people that I met during that week are still some of my closest friends today. So that was definitely a perk with it, and I just really saw how many opportunities this school has. And so when I was fortunate enough to get the Coronat Scholarship, that definitely sealed it, and it's been one of the most incredible opportunities.

John Boccacino:

And you definitely took advantage of the great student opportunities as well at Syracuse, both being a student research mentor with SOURCE and of course getting involved with CFSA, which I know we talked about before, the Center for Fellowship and Scholarship Advising. Can you share a little bit about both of those experiences, both with CFSA and SOURCE, how they've really molded you into the researcher and the scholar that you are today?

Gretchen Coleman:

So I'll start with CFSA because I got to get involved with them earlier in my college experience. So they basically want to go find Syracuse students who are potentially good candidates for the National and Competitive Scholarship and Fellowship Awards and then work with them to want to apply for the awards, but also to portray or figure out what the common thread is in their life that has prepared them to go be competitive for these awards. And so I started working with Jolynn from the Center for Fellowship and Scholarship Advising my freshman year just to learn more what the office provided and all of that. And she gave me really helpful tips from the beginning of just, "You might want to be more involved in this way or keep these opportunities in mind further on down the road."

And so each of the scholarships that I applied for ended up really impacting me in really profound ways. I think even especially the ones that didn't end up going anywhere in terms of the scholarship itself. I applied for one fellowship my sophomore year that was essentially you had to go propose an idea of a change that you wanted to make in your community, and then, essentially if you got the fellowship, you'd spend the summer being able to implement that with all this supervision and mentorship and things like that. Ended up not getting the fellowship, but the idea that I pitched to them was some kind of youth voting initiative to engage more young people in the political process. And I ended up doing that on my own. So I realized I had this great idea to go try to get more young people to vote and to give them the information and resources they need to vote in Illinois.

And then I spent the next two years really involved in this new initiative, Ballot Z that I created. And I definitely wouldn't have done that without having done that application. And then from there, I think as I applied for more scholarships, I really was able to hone in, wow I really like elections and I really want this to be my career, really passionate about this. And then Jolynn worked with me to help me figure out what does that mean in terms of who has this kind of career, what are the different steps he needs to take to get there? And I was able to chart that out from a really, I think, comparatively early age. And that has really benefited me going forward.

John Boccacino:

It's great to hear how the journey gets from the past states where we are today to connect the dots and I can't wait to see what you're able to turn around with this research, again, from the great program, the Fulbright Postgraduate Award program. You're a recipient for this year studying over at the University of Manchester, working on her master's program. She is Gretchen Coleman. I know she's going to do great work with this line of research here. And it's all thanks to again, Syracuse University and the Fulbright Postgraduate Program.

Gretchen, thank you for making the time to stop by and give us some insights into a world that we really haven't covered here on the podcast. It's really been eye-opening and I hope you have nothing but the best of luck with your research moving forward.

Gretchen Coleman:

Thank you so much for having me, and thank you for giving the opportunity to share.

John Boccacino:

Thanks for checking out the latest installment of the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. My name is John Boccacino, signing off for the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast.