

# Michael Neblo is Optimistic about Democracy Transcript

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## SPEAKERS

Eva Dale, David Staley, Michael Neblo

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**E** Eva Dale 00:00

From the heart of the Ohio State University on The Oval, this is Voices from Arts and Sciences with your host, David Staley. Voices focuses on the innovative work being done by faculty and staff in the College of Arts and Sciences at The Ohio State University. From departments as wide ranging as art, astronomy, chemistry and biochemistry, physics, emergent materials, mathematics and languages, among many others. The college always has something great happening. Join us to find out what's new now.

**D** David Staley 00:30

Michael Neblo is an associate professor in the Ohio State University Department of Political Science, he is an affiliated faculty in the Department of Philosophy and Public Policy, and he is the director of the Institute for Democratic Engagement and Accountability, the OSU IDEA. His research focuses on deliberative democracy and political psychology. His new book is titled Politics with the People: Building a Directly Representative Democracy. He develops and tests a new model for politics, connecting citizens and elected officials to improve representative government. He will be the featured speaker at the September 16th Science Sundays, presented by the College of the Arts and Sciences, which is a free and open to the public event. Welcome to Voices from the Arts and Sciences, Dr. Neblo.

**M** Michael Neblo 01:19

Thank you so much, thanks for having me.

**D** David Staley 01:21

So, let's start first with some definitions. What do you mean or what is meant by deliberative democracy?

**M** Michael Neblo 01:27

So, the basic idea behind deliberative democracy is that politics and democracy in particular is different from markets. It's not the same thing as, you know, we just buy policies with our votes and our dollars. So for example, what brand of toothpaste do you use, David?

**D** David Staley 01:48

What brand of toothpaste do I use?

**M** Michael Neblo 01:50

Yes, what brand of toothpaste?

**D** David Staley 01:51

I use Colgate.

**M** Michael Neblo 01:52

Okay, Colgate. I think Colgate is terrible. You should use Crest. Now, if I said that to you, you might reasonably say to me "Shut up, I like Colgate, leave me alone," right? But, if I were to tell you that you are using your political power to take away my property, or tell me who could count as a member of my family, or whether our sons or daughters are going to be sent off to war, and I said, "Why do you think that David?" and you said "Shut up, leave me alone, that's what I want," deliberative democracy says that's not okay, that we owe each other justifications and rationales if we're going to use power over each other, if our policies are going to be enforced with people with guns.

**D** David Staley 02:38

And so, the other thing I'd like you to define then is political psychology. Is that... I assume it's related to what you just said, or...

**M** Michael Neblo 02:45

It is. Political psychology is a broad term, but in general, it studies how people make decisions, what influences them, what sort of factors lead them to engage in various political behaviors, voting, things along those lines. So, it's allied with standard psychology, what you would

understand as standard psychology, but it's oriented around the psychological processes that influence political beliefs and behaviors.

**D** David Staley 03:15

So, I mentioned in the introduction that you'll be speaking at Science Sundays on September 16th, Politics With the People, which, as I said, shares its title with your most recent book, which is described as a new model of politics connecting citizens and elected officials to improve representative government. Tell us about this, this new model.

**M** Michael Neblo 03:36

So in one sense, it's a new model, in another sense, it's a very old model that we're we're harkening back to the founders' envisioned of what representative democracy was supposed to be like in the United States. And the premise is that we wandered very far from that, and in political science, and I think in politics more generally, a lot of people think politics just is partisan politics and interest group clashes. And in political science, it's often treated that way. And the idea that a citizen would be represented as a citizen, rather than represented as a member of a political party, or a member of a pressure group seems naive and silly.

**D** David Staley 04:18

Is that what you mean by going back to the founders? What specifically do you mean when you say that, back to the founders, how was what the founders' envisioned different from say, what exists today?

**M** Michael Neblo 04:28

Good, well, the founders were worried about parties and factions.

**D** David Staley 04:33

Really?

**M** Michael Neblo 04:34

Yes. George Washington in his farewell address warned against parties, James Madison in the Federalist Papers warned and was worried about factions, what he called factions.

**D** David Staley 04:45

Why, what's wrong with parties?

M Michael Neblo 04:46

The idea...well, it's not clear that there's anything wrong with parties. I want to make clear, I'm not against political parties.

D David Staley 04:52

No, the founders.

M Michael Neblo 04:53

But the founders worried that factions, that groups that were organized to promote their own interests against the interests of the public would subvert politics. Now, what I think has changed, is that a lot of people today in political science, philosophy, and in the public, among politicians and pundits, a lot of people more or less believe there is no such thing as the public good, that what the public could consist in is everybody cutting their best deal and letting the chips fall where they may, and deliberative democracy doesn't concede that. It's not that there's one single public good that everybody must converge upon, but that what's best in politics isn't necessarily everybody just fighting it out, trying to promote their own interests, but rather, trying to think through how their interests fit into a larger puzzle of what's good for the Republic.

D David Staley 05:49

So this model that you mentioned, this new model of politics, that looks like what?

M Michael Neblo 05:55

So, the main thing that we're talking about is what we have called directly representative democracy.

D David Staley 06:01

Oh, okay.

M Michael Neblo 06:02

And the idea there, and there's supposed to be a little hint of a paradox there in political science and even in, I think, you know, just talking about politics, there's oftentimes thought to be a tension between direct democracy and representative democracy. Representative democracy is elected officials do all the work, direct democracy is, you know, ballot initiatives and recalls and referenda and things along those lines. What we're trying to promote is the idea that people can't quit their day jobs, that the average citizens can't quit their day jobs, and

that it makes sense to have elected representatives who are professionals at crafting public policy and engaging in politics. But, that doesn't mean that the only thing that citizens do is show up every two, four, or six years, if they bother to show up and check a box on a ballot. They have more meaningful ways to contribute to the policy and political process, and in particular, that they can do so in ways that engage them just as citizens rather than partisans trying to promote their elected official, or members of interest groups who are implacably pushing one particular set of policies rather than thinking about what's good for the country.

**D** David Staley 07:14

So as a citizen, what's my role, or what are my responsibilities or my actions in such a model?

**M** Michael Neblo 07:19

Great question. So one of the things that, in the book, that we talk a lot about was we did field experiments with actual sitting members of Congress, talking to their actual constituents about actual pending legislation. Now, some people say, oh, this isn't real politics. I say, what about real legislators talking about real legislation with their actual constituents isn't politics? Now, it's an unusual form of politics, I agree to that, but that's the whole point was we're trying to promote this unusual form of politics. And so really, it doesn't ask that much of citizens. What it asks is that every couple of years, they spend a couple of hours, maybe one hour training up on an issue and then an hour talking to their elected officials and fellow citizens about an issue and giving their feedback just as a citizen, not as a member of a party or an interest group, or people who have already made up their mind.

**D** David Staley 08:14

So the talk you're giving for Science Sundays says that you will explore some realistic reform proposals based on your research into what ails democratic politics in the U.S. So what ails us?

**M** Michael Neblo 08:26

Well, I'm afraid to say a lot ails us in my view, but what I'm focusing on and referring to there is this notion that the idea of what's good for the country, what's good for the Republic, the Commonwealth is silly and naive, and that really what politics is, should be, and only can be is people just pressing their interests as hard as they can. Now, we have a lot of evidence to suggest that that's exactly what turns people off about politics. They think it's a mug's game, they think it's irrational, they think that it's like sports enthusiasms, that I root for my team, whatever my team does, not because my team is doing something worthwhile or virtuous, or it's going to help the country or even help me. And so, the idea behind the reform proposals is to create new institutional outlets for people to have meaningful input into the policy process in ways that go beyond just donating to interest groups, or showing up in voting.

**D** David Staley 09:30

Is that done through technology or something like that, social media?

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M

Michael Neblo 09:34

So, there is a big technology component to this. Our first round of this project was quite a while ago, but what we did is leverage the power of the Internet to do electronic town halls, online town halls, that were much more deliberative. And when I say deliberative, I mean that we got a random sample of constituents, it wasn't just the people who show up all the time, who decades of political science research suggests are really just the most extreme people. We have people who just wanted to show up and hear from their elected official and make up their own minds by their own lights. And it turns out, there was huge demand for this, and that it was an utterly different experience. A lot of research suggests that at these town halls, members of Congress don't try to persuade, because the only people who are who are there are their fans who they don't have to persuade, or their harshest critics who they can't persuade. In ours, it was mostly people in the middle, and so the members of Congress spent all of their time trying to persuade on the merits.

D

David Staley 09:34

So how did you manage that, how did how did you find...how did you find the middle?

M

Michael Neblo 10:35

We did special outreach efforts, we worked in this first round, we worked with a polling firm, we did something akin to a random sample in polling, and now we're exploring ways to recruit similar sorts of broad samples of people without necessarily working through polling firms. But part of it also, is that online made it so much easier, a working single mom doesn't have to hire a babysitter, you know, and drive all the way to an in person town hall. All they got to do is find an hour where they can get online, maybe just put on a video for their kids, or ask a neighbor to allow them to do a play date or something like that. It's much, much easier, and you get a completely different group of people participating.

D

David Staley 11:18

Well, and it's probably not an accident that you call these town halls, because that evokes, I suppose, a kind of direct or a form of deliberative democracy. And we really would sit down in a town hall and, and have this kind of conversation.

M

Michael Neblo 11:30

Absolutely, absolutely. You know, Abraham Lincoln used to hold office hours for average citizens. Now, I'm not...

D

David Staley 11:36

In the White House?

**M** Michael Neblo 12:10

Yes. And I'm not saying that something like that is practical, the country has grown dramatically. There's all kinds of reasons why we can't go back to a model like that. If nothing else, that you know, what a citizen was back, and was a lot more restricted than it is now, unfortunately, was more restricted. But, I do think we can find new ways, new institutions and leverage new technology to reconnect elected officials to their constituents.

**D** David Staley 12:10

So, a little earlier, you had made reference to the fact that you do field experiments.

**M** Michael Neblo 12:10

Yes.

**D** David Staley 12:12

Is that common in political science, to do field experiments?

**M** Michael Neblo 12:14

It is becoming more common. Doing it with members of Congress is exceedingly rare, and to our knowledge, we're the only ones who have, but it is becoming more common to do field experiments. So, there's a wonderful book called *The Victory Lab* that was about political scientists working with campaigns on trying to find the most effective ways to get out the vote, persuade people to vote for various sorts of candidates, and it wasn't a lab experiment. These were real issues, real constituents, real campaigns. And that was sort of the launch, I would say, of field experiments in political science. It starts a little before that, but it really got rolling, and then we moved it out of campaigns and more into governance.

**D** David Staley 12:57

So, and to be clear, you're observing what's going on? Or are you also sort of advising at the same time, sort of like action research?

**M** Michael Neblo 13:06

No, I wouldn't call it action research. I was the moderator, I personally was the moderator for the sessions. But moderating, it was very light handed, I introduced a member of Congress, I called time and moved things along with the questions and the comments

called time and moved things along with the questions and the comments.

**D** David Staley 13:23

So you really are an observer. What other sorts of techniques do political scientists use to study politics, if not field experiments?

**M** Michael Neblo 13:31

Well, sure. Well, there are lab experiments as well.

**D** David Staley 13:32

What do they do? In the lab?

**M** Michael Neblo 13:35

Yeah, in the lab, where there are controlled experiments. Now, some people worry that that doesn't really get at anything that would be generalizable to real politics. But in some ways...

**D** David Staley 13:46

Because it's such an artificial sort of situation?

**M** Michael Neblo 13:48

Exactly, it's such an artificial environment. But there there is some evidence to suggest that some of the lab experiments that are, especially that are looking at political psychology, are like the kinds of psychology experiments that psychologists run, and that really do tap just how people think at a very fundamental level, how they react to new information, how they react to interacting with their fellow constituents. And in a lot of cases, that evidence exports pretty well, it comports well with what we find out in real politics as well. And then there's a third, well, there's more than a third, but a third major component, which is surveys and other sort of open ended aspects that aren't experiments, per se, but do gather evidence systematically. And then I would say the fourth is historical research, institutional research, qualitative research, interviews, things along those lines, but those would probably be the four major ways that people gather evidence in political science.

**D** David Staley 14:49

You've made some reference to this, but I'm curious to know what other political scientists, your colleagues, what are they saying about our particular political moment? What, is there a consensus or what's the conversation, I guess, among political historians, or political scientists?



M

Michael Neblo 15:05

Yeah, so, political historians, I don't know as well, though I do read about what political historians are saying, so I have a little bit of that. I want to be careful here. I wouldn't say that there's a consensus, I would say that there's very widespread concern over the erosion of norms. And I don't want to get particularly partisan here, but we are living in a very different kind of political culture right now, and the President is a very different kind of President. And of course, many people think that's exactly what we needed. There are some political scientists and political theorists who agree with that, who think that we needed a fundamental reorganization of our political culture, and that if you have to break some eggs to make an omelet, so be it. I would say that that's decidedly a minority view. And I would even say it's decidedly a minority view, even among conservative political scientists, political science is not quite as politically skewed. It tends to be people who are more liberal, but there are a fair few conservatives. But, I would say even most of the conservative political scientists are worried about the erosion of democratic norms and some of the differences and changes in our political culture.

D

David Staley 16:16

So what's on your research horizon? What's next for Michael Neblo?

M

Michael Neblo 16:19

Well, we're very excited our book, we have a wonderful opportunity with Cambridge University Press in a group called the Congressional Management Foundation. We're giving a copy of this new book to every member of Congress, it's going to be hand delivered with a cover letter from this organization. In addition, we have been invited to present on the ideas at the orientation session for new members of Congress after the midterm elections. And in that orientation, we're going to try to recruit a new cohort of elected officials, members of Congress to do another round of studies. And this time, what we're really going to focus on in the first round, we really focused on the citizens and the effects that interacting with their elected officials had on citizens. This time, the focus is going to shift a little and try to really in detail, look at the influence that citizens and constituents have on their elected officials, especially when they're given good quality information and feedback from their constituents via these deliberative forums.

D

David Staley 17:23

Michael Neblo, thank you.

M

Michael Neblo 17:25

Thank you so much.



Eva Dale 17:27

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