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Reflections of an Accidental Political Scientist

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Kemp Award Address 2015
Kathleen A. Montgomery

“Reflections of An Accidental Political Scientist”

It is a great honor to have the opportunity to speak to our 2015 student honorees. I’d like to thank President Wilson, Provost Green, the Board of Trustees, and the Kemp Foundation for their support of teaching at IWU. I’d also like to thank all the wonderful colleagues and students over the years. You have made Illinois Wesleyan feel like home. Finally, deepest gratitude goes to my husband and fellow political scientist, Frank Boyd, for everything (of course) but especially today for patiently helping me survive the preparation for this address. Before I begin, let me also give a shout out to our kids. Alston and Bronwen: I am so proud of you every single day. It means the world that you are here.

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Seniors, you are here today to be honored for all you have accomplished in your time at IWU. Soon, you will step beyond the walls of this university and out into that illimitable space called The Future. This is a heady time but also a little nerve-wracking. I’ll bet the questions have already started.

“What’s next?”
“What are you planning to do with that major?”
“Lovely about the awards, but what are your plans after graduation?”

Mostly, these questions serve as conversational filler. They don’t require an elaborate or deep response. Still, if you are asked often enough you might start to think you are supposed to have answers—that you actually ought to know what you are going to do with the rest of your life.
I’m here today to assure you otherwise.

I’ve spent most of my adult life studying and teaching politics, but, as the title of this talk suggests, I did not set out to be a political scientist. I’ve actually had a few students approach me after seeing the poster, puzzled and maybe even slightly alarmed: What exactly do I mean by “accidental”? The only way I can explain it is to provide a little bit of my personal background, so maybe that’s where we should start.

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Fun fact: Long before I became a professor, I was a kid growing up in the back-to-the-land movement. My family started out here [slide 2] in suburban Southern California and later moved here [slide 3] to rural Northern California to start a self-sufficient organic homestead.

To say that we were part of a movement probably overstates the level of coordination. People in those days went back to the land for various reasons. Some joined communes; others were anti-government survivalists. My parents came at it from the political Left. They were committed environmentalists who rejected the mainstream suburban lifestyle, which they associated with conspicuous consumption, empty materialism, cultural conformity, and (of course) environmental destruction.

They wanted to live a simpler life, closer to the land, and initially tried to create that in a suburb of LA. We had chickens, rabbits, and dairy goats right in the middle of an otherwise normal-looking subdivision. [slide 4]
My parents tore up the lawn and replaced it with raised beds. We set up a little shop on our front porch and sold our homegrown fruits and vegetables and yogurt made from raw goat’s milk.

I didn't know at the time how different we were or how much the neighbors despised what we were doing. They called the city inspectors to harass us on various code violations—real and imagined. A vet friend had to cauterize our rooster’s vocal cords so he wouldn't wake the neighbors at dawn. We had to turn over the compost heap in a certain way so there wouldn’t be any smell. Flies were a constant worry.

I think we were already out of L.A. before I realized that our across-the-back neighbors weren’t really named “Mr. and Mrs. Clean”. [That was just my parents’ nickname for them!]

Eventually the situation became impossible, and we took the whole operation North. My Dad fashioned a camper on the back of our 1961 Ford with a canvas tarp and tent poles. We were one part Ingles Family and one part Joad, singing “Little Boxes” at the top of our lungs as we left suburbia behind.

We settled in a small coastal valley near the town of Boonville, population 714. [Slide 5] No more need to worry about neighbors. And, yes, that is me--hugging my little goat, Edelweiss.

What is the road that leads from milking goats in Northern California to teaching college in Central Illinois. It’s been a strange trip.

[slide 6]
Our family never made it completely off the grid, but at the height of our homesteading years we produced most of what we consumed and managed to live without things that most Americans take for granted.

It would be natural to conclude that this counter-cultural upbringing drew me to politics. But, the back-to-the-land movement was a politics of daily living reconfigured as a politics of resistance. What we did was anti-political or at least anti-political-establishment. I don't think it launched me toward a career in political science—at least not in any direct way. I always figured I'd grow up to be an artist or a writer or maybe go into something practical like forest conservation.

Political science snuck up on me.

[Slide 7 to black] *****

The program you are holding says that I have a doctorate in comparative politics with specializations in post-communist Eastern Europe and gender politics. That makes me sound like the sort of person who was born with a plan and unwaveringly followed it through. But, that couldn’t be less true.

In college I changed my major multiple times and wound up with political science mostly because the major had relatively few requirements. I applied to graduate school in three different fields and went to the program that gave me the most money, which happened to be political science. In 1989 I headed off to grad school to study comparative communism. By the end of the year the Berlin Wall had come down, the Cold War was over, and I had a new field: comparative democratization. I only started studying gender politics when I
came to IWU and was asked to develop a *Women and Politics* course.

Even my original interest in Eastern Europe was born of a happy accident. I was studying abroad for my Junior year in Vienna. Like so many study abroad experiences, mine threw open a million doors. One frustration, though, was that I couldn’t afford to taste all the beautiful cakes and pastries in the shop windows. [slide 8].

Then, I discovered communist Hungary. Budapest (which was basically Vienna’s down-in-the-heels imperial sibling) had all the same cakes but at a fraction of the price. Well, that was it! I was hooked!

I have returned to Hungary many times over the years: for language study and field research. I’ve travelled throughout the former Eastern Bloc and discovered many compelling interests that continue to tie me to the region. But, it really did all begin with cake!

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[slide 8 to black]

So far, I have focused on the accidental nature of my career path; but that probably underplays the role that a few core interests have played in pulling me along. To show you what I mean, I’d like to spend a few minutes describing some of my research. It is spread out across a variety of empirical contexts, but there is, I think, a common conceptual thread. Regardless of the specific topic, I have been concerned with issues of representation, political equality, and inclusion.
My early research looked at the representative roles of members elected to a newly democratized parliament—[slide 9], the Hungarian National Assembly. Most of the members in the early nineties were amateurs—new to politics. Under the communist regime, they had been historians or dentists or rural veterinarians, and now they were elected as democratic representatives. I conducted interviews to find out who they saw themselves as representing and how they thought a member of parliament ought to do the job. [Actually, I chose this picture of the National Assembly rather than the usual view taken from across the river, because I managed to get my hands on a press pass and would go in with the journalists through this back-side entrance.]

[Slide 10] When I started studying gender politics I researched the factors inhibiting women’s access to power in post-communist societies. Women had been largely excluded from party formation and constitutional debates during the democratic transition period. After transition, they faced substantial new barriers with the rise of ethnic nationalism and the persistence of patriarchal cultural norms reflected in the mostly male party leaderships. [In this photo you can see a group of women in the Hungarian parliament protesting a male mayor who admitted to violently beating his wife and then refused to resign. The signs call out the ruling party, Fidesz. They read: “Fidesz boys! Wife beaten is good, right?” This sarcastically calls back to a folk saying, “Money counted, wife beaten, is good.”] Groan.

I think they need more women in politics!

I didn’t have a gender politics research agenda until I came here; now I can’t imagine having a career that didn’t grapple with these issues.
In fact, I wrote a novel inspired by some of the movements we study in *Women and Politics*: [Slide 11] movements in which ordinary citizens who do not see themselves as political nonetheless mobilize to effect profound political change—to demand peace, or protect the environment, or speak truth to power in ways that can shake an authoritarian regime to its core.

--Now, don't run out to the bookstore and expect to see this novel! It still isn’t 100% finished, and I suspect it’s not particularly good. I mention it today because I want you to see that there are many different ways to pursue an idea. The novel offered a different, creative way of treating the same issues that run through all my empirical research.

Most recently, I’ve started to study European far right parties—and, in particular a Hungarian party called Jobbik.

[Slide 12 Jobbik]

Jobbik is an exclusionary populist party, meaning that it sees society as divided into two mutually antagonistic groups: the corrupt elites and the wholesome people who Jobbik believes ought to be sovereign. But, when Jobbik says “Power to the people!” it has a very specific idea of who the people are and (more importantly) who they are *not*, a long list that includes: Roma, Jews, foreigners, feminists, homosexuals, former communists, members of the ruling party, Eurocrats, and pretty much any elites that Jobbik deems insufficiently nationalist. [[In this picture, you can see members of Jobbik’s unofficial militia wearing a uniform modeled on the one worn by the interwar fascist party, the Arrow Cross.]]
Of all the research I’ve described, this must seem the furthest from Northern California organic-hippie-homesteading. But, if you think about it: exclusion is the parasitic twin of inclusion. Jobbik now claims to be the second largest party in Hungary, and similar parties have been making gains all across Europe. It is tempting to look away—many of these are frankly nasty organizations. They espouse horrible ideas: they objectify and exclude women and promote various chauvinisms (Jobbik, for instance, keeps an unofficial website that tracks what they call Gypsy crime and Jewish crime). It’s ugly stuff, but I think that’s exactly why it’s essential to scrutinize and interrogate the electoral appeal of these parties.

A Hungarian colleague once said to me: “I don’t get it. You study politics, but... you seem so...nice?”

I can’t say whether I am nice or not (...with finals coming up I’m sure my students would tell you the matter is far from settled). What has stayed with me about the comment is the naturalness and ease of the underlying assumption: that politics and decency are fundamentally at odds.

You all know the stereotypes. Politicians are idiots (numb, incompetent bureaucrats)--or else they’re craven, power-obsessed sociopaths. [slide 14] Popular shows like House of Cards confirm what we already suspect: that power corrupts, and the corrupt seek power--at any cost.
Meanwhile, comedians build whole shows around the simple device of pointing out and commenting on the absurdity of political rhetoric, behavior, and media coverage.

Now, any student of mine will tell you that I love political satire and often bring clips into class. I also love to laugh with my classes about parliamentary brawls [Slide 16] (Ukraine has given us a great deal to look at over the past year) and angry citizens pelting their leaders with foodstuffs [slide 17] (Here we have eggs and flour, though other foods will do).

And, for Poli Sci people there is absolutely nothing better than a rowdy session of Prime Minister’s Question Time in the British House of Commons, like this one featuring Prime Minister David Cameron...

[WATCH CLIP]

Ah yes, nothing quite like the lofty discourse in the world’s oldest parliamentary democracy!

It’s good to laugh. Nothing brings out the extremes of human behavior like politics, and that is funny. I don’t think, however, that we should use humor or cynicism to distance ourselves from politics. And, I definitely don’t think that politics is an unworthy topic for decent people to study.

Allow me to elaborate.

[slide 18] In my introductory course, Comparing Nations, we start off with a basic definition of politics as: “The struggle for power to make authoritative decisions on behalf of the public as a whole.”
If we focus solely on the first part—the struggle for power—it’s not surprising that politics has a dubious reputation. We have to read on to discover what the struggle is for: to make authoritative decisions on behalf of the public.

The intellectual historian, Tony Judt, laments that Americans nowadays find it difficult to use the word “public” without embarrassment. We tend to reduce all of politics to rational calculations about self-interest and treat with cynicism notions like public service, public-mindedness, public goods, and the public interest.

The popular TV show Parks and Recreation derives its humor from turning audience cynicism on its head. [Slide 19] We get the character of Leslie Knope, a local public servant who loves her small Midwestern community of Pawnee and genuinely wants to serve the people in it.

I’m not going to stand here and say that the reality of politics is all selfless public service. If it were, Leslie Knope wouldn’t be funny. Politics is responsible for much of what is worst in human history. But, politics is also about making decisions on behalf of the public; and it is within our power to ask whether a particular legislative act is good or just or fair, whether it will make society or the world a better place.

[slide 20]

Thomas Piketty, author of Capital in the 21st Century, writes: “Where there is socio-economic inequality, politics is never far behind.” I would argue that the same is true about political exclusion and injustice. How can you demand justice without asking about politics--about authority and legitimacy? Without asking who gets treated as part of the body politic? Who gets to
sit at the decision-making table and who does not? Those are all fundamentally and inextricably political questions.

[Slide: Finish Black]

I came to political science at least partly by accident, but I think those questions are terribly important. And, as I said before, I think that’s what keeps pulling me back to this career and this area of study.

The core concerns of politics keep finding me.

And, maybe some of you will discover the same, not with politics but with some other field: medicine or education, music or psychology, or something you haven’t even begun to imagine. You may find that if you just take a step forward after graduation, and then another, and another: before you know it you will have answers to all those well-meaning questions about your future.

Something will find you. It might be exactly what you always planned, and that’s great. But, it’s just as likely that life will throw you some interesting curves and you will realize (when you look back on it) that you were able to discover your direction and purpose precisely because things did not turn out as you thought or expected they would.

What I’ve learned from my own experience is that there is no single juncture in life on which everything hinges. You don’t have to have a plan that maps out the rest of your days. You’ve already accomplished so much. And, your education at Illinois Wesleyan has given you the judgment to let your interests guide you; to stay open to change and discovery; and to move forward with confidence. All the rest will follow.
So--To all the honored members of the class of 2015: let me say on behalf of the faculty, “Good luck and Congratulations!” [We can’t wait to learn how your stories will unfold!]
Works Cited


Slide Show

1. Title slide
2. Freeway picture: http://www.aaroads.com/california/images010/i-010 Eb_exit_031a_02.jpg
4., 5, 6. Personal photos
7. black screen
9. black screen
14. black screen
16. Daily Show, Colbert, John Oliver:
House of Commons PMQ clip
19. Quote from class
21. Justice
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