

Theda Skocpol



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A Conversation with Theda Skocpol

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Abstract

An interview with Theda Skocpol took place at Harvard University in December 2017. Professor Skocpol is the Victor S. Thomas Professor of Government and Sociology at Harvard University. Skocpol is the author of numerous books and articles well known in political science and beyond, including States and Social Revolutions, Protecting Soldiers and Mothers, Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life, and The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism (the latter coauthored with Vanessa Williamson). Skocpol has served as President of the American Political Science Association and the Social Science History Association. Among her honors, she is an elected member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Philosophical Society, and the National Academy of Sciences, and she was awarded the Johan Skytte Prize in Political Science. She was interviewed by Eric Schickler, the Jeffrey & Ashley McDermott Professor of Political Science at the University of California, Berkeley. The following is an edited transcript; a video of the entire interview can be viewed at https://www.annualreviews.org/r/ theda-skocpol.

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EARLY LIFE

Theda Skocpol: I grew up in Michigan. My parents were teachers and my grandparents farmers from different parts of the state, and there was a tussle in my family: My mother wanted me to go to a small liberal arts college and study home economics; my father, who was a high school teacher, was worried how much it was going to cost to send me to any college. And so when I was admitted to Michigan State University, I got my father on my side because at that time, it was certainly less expensive to go to the major state university in Michigan. I already knew what Michigan State and East Lansing, Michigan, were like before I tried to lobby my parents to let me go to one particular college over another.

Eric Schickler: At Michigan State, what brought you to sociology?

Skocpol: I was admitted into an honors program there, which meant that from the beginning, I was part of a fairly small group of students within the tens of thousands at Michigan State; and Honors College students were allowed to put together their own program. So I had a lot of freedom. Sociology attracted me. I had some charismatic professors early on. It just looked like a social science discipline where I could do a lot of different things, where I would be free to move around.

In retrospect, I think if I'd picked political science, I would have been slotted into comparative or American or theory or empirics. I could major in sociology but not be too tied down to any particular part of it, and I could also take classes in a lot of different disciplines, which I did.

Schickler: Were there any particular authors that influenced you especially when you were studying sociology at Michigan State?

Skocpol: Well, by the time I was a senior, I was in some small seminar-type classes with a man named James McKee, he taught things like Barrington Moore's books and C. Wright Mills and I was very taken with C. Wright Mills, I have to admit—the whole argument that you can marry the study of empirics with history and understand power dynamics.

This was the time of the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, so I wanted to understand real-world things, and I thought sociology, particularly as practiced by those giants, was the way to do it.

Schickler: So in the political events of the 1960s, were you involved as an activist?

Skocpol (*laughs*): I was, I was, yes. I was involved in the antiwar movement, although, I have to admit, I never went as far as some people. But I think the more important one was the Civil Rights Movement.

I met my husband in college, and we just celebrated our 50th wedding anniversary in June of 2017. I wouldn't have met him necessarily at Michigan State because he was a physics major from Texas, and I was a sociology major from Michigan. But we were both in the Methodist student organization. And at that time, the leader of the Methodist student group was very taken by Martin Luther King, who had come to speak in Lansing, Michigan, a year before we started at Michigan State.

That minister, and a couple of other Methodist ministers, talked themselves into the idea that it would be great to send a delegation of Michigan State undergraduates to Mississippi, to participate in an education project at an all-black college in Holly Springs, Rust College. Bill and I were in the Methodist student group that went, and that was a life-changing experience. We didn't necessarily get involved with any of the demonstrations that led to violence in Mississippi, because you had to have your parents' permission to leave the campus. And my parents would not give permission. But

we were in Mississippi and we were teaching English skills and math skills to entering freshmen at Rust College, who were the first people in their often sharecropper families to go to college. So we saw, along with all the other white students from Michigan State who went down there, we saw firsthand what segregation and racial oppression in the pre–Civil Rights South were like, and that was a life-changing experience, for sure.

Schickler: You spent your academic career at the most elite private universities, Harvard and University of Chicago, but you started out at a big public university, and had this formative experience in Mississippi. How do you think having that background has affected your approach as a scholar?

Skocpol: I think it keeps me grounded. I have been at Harvard University for a long time and I was a graduate student here and I love the place and I think it is the embodiment in many, many ways of excellence. But I think it's very important that I came from the Midwest, and I never feel as comfortable as when I am in the Midwest, and I know what the vast heartland of the country looks like and feels like.

My grandfather on my mother's side, who was a farmer in Michigan, would have been a Tea Party Republican if he were still alive, and so I have all those pictures in my mind of those kinds of relationships, and that has helped me never be taken in too far by the elitist propaganda of a place like Harvard University.

Schickler: Given your background, given your interest in real politics, as well as learning about society and politics, how did you decide that academia was where you wanted to go?

Skocpol: Boy, that's a good question. I feel as if I always wanted to be around books and research and college. I was very unpopular as a young woman, girl, in high school because I was what was called "a brain." That was not good in the big high school that I went to. It meant that you weren't one of the popular ones, and people really wanted to make your acquaintance only when they wanted to read your homework.

So I handled that by reading a lot. And by the time I got to college, I was still a very good student, I was intrigued, I got involved in some professors' research projects very early on, and it's hard to go back into that time, but people weren't as worried about economic and careerist things then.

The major worry I remember my soon-to-be-husband and I having was how to make sure he didn't get shipped off to the Vietnam War. Staying in college (*laughs*) was a practical as well as a logical thing.

But I think for me, I just liked it. It was beginning to be possible for women to have serious careers, just beginning. My teachers encouraged me to apply for fellowships and I won them. That made it possible to go to Harvard.

STATES AND SOCIAL REVOLUTIONS

Schickler: You mentioned Barrington Moore's book as an influence on you as an undergraduate. I know that he was one of your teachers at Harvard, though he didn't actually end up on your dissertation committee. What was it like to work with or learn from Moore?

Skocpol: Well, one of the first things that happened when I got to Harvard was that I found out that Barrington Moore, who I thought was a young radical—I had read *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*—well I found out he was a crotchety, eighteenth-century style (*laughs*), fairly old-fashioned authoritarian in the classroom. He held a competition to get into his seminar, a seminar on theory. So the first weekend in graduate school at Harvard, you had to write an essay to get into

this seminar. It was an essay on what are the testable propositions in *The Communist Manifesto*—and how (*laughs*) would you go about testing them? Marxism was *en vogue* at that point. So I wrote my essay, I got in. He ran the thing with what he called the Socratic totalitarian method, which is, he would throw out a question about these readings, which were almost impossible to do to. We had to read Althusser in French, for example. He doesn't make sense in English, and in French it's even worse if it's your second language. So Moore would go around the table until somebody said what he wanted and then he would accept that answer. But I came back for more. After that first year, I applied for the seminar that was basically *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, and I loved that. That's where I learned to do the kinds of things that led to my thesis and book on revolutions.

Schickler: It seems hard to imagine a thesis more ambitious than (laughs) the Chinese, French, and Russian revolutions.

Skocpol: Yeah, it was actually crazy (*laughs*). At that time, sociology was just a very exciting discipline. I was a sociologist, I wasn't a political scientist at that time, and I always thought of myself as studying politics and social movements, among other things, but I was a sociologist in my Ph.D. program. And there you had Seymour Martin Lipset, you had Daniel Bell, you had Talcott Parsons, who died just as I was a young graduate student, but still, he was there and his mark was on the department.

These were sociologists who thought big, and wrote big, and to some degree, they'd encouraged that or at least allowed it in some of their graduate students. I wrote a paper about revolutions, I think it was for some intermediate step in the process, drawing on what I learned in Moore's seminar and critiquing available theories. And Daniel Bell read the paper, and I can remember very clearly sitting there in his office and he said, "Well, this is a thesis in the best sense of the word, why don't you do that?"

Now I glommed onto that, I think I was a stubborn person, and I thought, yep, I've got an insight here about how revolutions work that is different from the theories that are out there. I realized that state organizations, the military and the bureaucracy, had to collapse in conflict with upper classes before there were openings for class revolts from below. And so I launched into it. It almost killed me because it was too big a project, I almost didn't get it done in time. But in the end, I had an argument, I had an insight, and I developed it about two thirds of the way in the Ph.D. thesis and I finally got it done. That thesis turned out to be a brilliant choice because I had done something new that I was passionate about and that I could defend.

Schickler: The thesis and the book (*States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China*) are an exercise in comparative historical research, which has become your hall-mark. How did historians respond to you in some sense treading on their ground in these canonical cases?

Skocpol: Not well, not well, it was actually pretty shocking for many historians. They didn't understand historical work in sociology and political science, and they did see it as treading in their territory and would particularly not like it if you didn't know the language.

I knew French, but I did not know Russian and Chinese. And I took a lot of flak for that after the book came out. Not so much while the thesis was being developed, because there were no historians on the committee. I was working with what I'd learned from Barrington Moore, taking advice from him, but he wasn't on my committee. Seymour Martin Lipset was. He had already done comparative historical work, he respected it. And they understood that I was using historians' work to systematically develop and test hypotheses at a secondary level.

After the book came out, though, it took a lot of potshots from historians in every field. I think the turning point was at Berkeley, actually. It was maybe a year out or so and the Berkeley History Department invited me to a colloquium where I was going to present the thesis of the book, and a historian of France, a historian of Russia, and a historian of China were going to criticize it. And that happened, and it was a packed room. There were hundreds of people there, lots of historians, but I demonstrated in the discussion that I knew the work of the historians, and that I knew the work of the previous generations of historians, and I came out of that with their respect. Not necessarily with everybody agreeing, but people understanding how I had used the works of historians.

Schickler: The book also has had an enduring influence in both sociology and political science. Did you have political science in mind as an audience when you were writing it?

Skocpol: I don't think I cared about that at all. I cared about understanding the similarities and differences and what had happened in these revolutions, and what set them apart from things that weren't social revolutions. So I was operating in the Barrington Moore worldview, and remember, Barrington Moore was in some ways a political scientist and sociologist both.

So was Seymour Martin Lipset. He was in both disciplines, so in a way, my chief mentors, intellectual mentors in any event, were not people who particularly respected disciplinary boundaries. What they taught was: Ask a question, and pursue the answers using the resources and the methods of all disciplines.

Still, I think I could have only done this in sociology. I think only sociology would have allowed that boundary crossing. I don't think political science would have at that time. But the work probably caught on more in political science after *States and Social Revolutions* came out. It came to be seen as a major work in comparative politics.

BRINGING THE STATE BACK IN AND PROTECTING SOLDIERS AND MOTHERS

Schickler: I want to ask now about a field-building project you did, involving collaboration with other sociologists, that culminated in the *Bringing the State Back In* volume. What led you to that goal of trying to build up an approach that really did cross sociology and political science?

Skocpol: It's a good question in a way because that's something that sets me apart completely from Barrington Moore. Barrington Moore never was interested in building anything inside academia or disciplines. He thought disciplinary politics was a waste of time. He didn't even go to the professional meetings. By the time I was a young professor at Harvard, I think I understood that there was a need to work with other young faculty who were beginning to develop comparative historical methods.

But it was really Peter Evans who came to me. We only barely knew each other because he had graduated from the Harvard Sociology Department well ahead of most of my time there. He and Dietrich Rueschemeyer came to me and said let's try to create a working group at the Social Science Research Council. The Social Science Research Council was encouraging field-defining projects. They were the ones that drew me into it and we drew up a plan.

We really understood that this book could help to define a way of thinking about the state and society and politics that was new. In some ways, it was also very old, went back to an earlier era of institutional political science. By that time, I was at the University of Chicago, and I was in both sociology and political science. So I saw this as an intellectual project in both disciplines, not just in one.

Schickler: Some of these ideas get applied in your work on the New Deal era that you were working on at that time, and I guess maybe your first foray into American politics. What led you to decide to work on the New Deal?

Skocpol: I never was one of these kinds of scholars that picks a subject matter and decides I'm going to work on that 'til death. I was interested in puzzles about things that happened in the real world. And so after writing what I had to say about the causes and outcomes of social revolutions, I then became interested in this whole question of reformism in democratic capitalism. What were the sources of that, both inside government institutions and—the other part of bringing the state back in was thinking about how organized social forces interact with a particular institutional structure of government. So I was interested in those puzzles, and the New Deal seemed like a good way to think about them. There were all kinds of debates about what was the driver of reform, and what were its limits, but I have to say, my primary commitment has always been to understand the actual historical outcomes. To understand the variations over time and across cases. The theoretical gains are hopefully part of that process, but I don't sit down, read the *APSR* and say, "What's the next squiggle in this theory?"—or for that matter the *American Sociological Review*. I don't do those things, so I'm not theoretically driven, I'm a theory user. I use different theories to try to understand real-world patterns and outcomes.

Schickler: This is also a time when American Political Development is starting to come into—vogue might be too strong a word, but becoming part of the conversation at least.

Skocpol: Stephen Skowronek's book (*Building a New American State*) had a big impact on me, I think I was beginning to move from the New Deal to try and understand the material that would go into *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*, the insight that the Civil War pension system was a de facto early welfare state, and these programs for mothers and children at the turn of the century. Skowronek's book about the evolution of patronage democracy in the United States and its transformation into a partially bureaucratized state in the twentieth century was very influential.

The other big influence was Marty Shefter's work (later collected in *Political Parties and the State: The American Historical Experience*), and that was explicitly comparative. In the early phases of his career, Shefter really outlined some ideas that I think remain to this day very powerful in thinking about how the relative timing of the bureaucratization of states and the emergence of mass political parties shapes the way in which interests are organized into a nation's politics. So I just saw the United States as a place where there were some things I was noticing using that perspective that nobody else had noticed. I'm always looking for something that I might develop that others have not already discovered, because I like to be a little contrarian.

Schickler: One, I think it's fair to say, contrarian aspect of that book (*Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*) is this idea that Civil War pensions were a form of social policy. How did you make that discovery?

Skocpol: Boy, it really was a discovery, because I was going to write a book about the New Deal, and about the shaping of the modern welfare state from the Social Security Act on; that was the original plan (*laughs*). That book has never been written. I thought, well, maybe if you're a historical institutionalist, which is how I was thinking of myself by then because I was in political science rather than in political sociology, I thought, maybe you better go back and look at the earlier period, and I thought of it mainly in terms of things that hadn't happened in the Progressive Era, the attempts to create an early social insurance system that were very important.

But I was reading one particular book, I remember this very clearly, it was the summer, I was not at the University of Chicago at that point. I was in New Jersey for the summer, and I read Isaac

Max Rubinow's *Social Insurance*, which was a brilliant, comparative study of early social insurance and social spending and welfare systems, dated 1913, I believe.

And I'm reading the book, and he says, "The United States is spending more and covering more people than any other country." I thought, what can this man be saying, how can he be saying that at a time when we all know the United States was lagging and doing nothing. So I read the chapter, and he was talking about Civil War pensions. He was talking about the amount of spending, the proportion of the population covered, the generosity of the old age benefits and disability benefits compared to Germany and England at the time, and I thought, wow. Just noticing that set me off on an investigation into what these very generous Civil War pensions were and then I started asking why. How could this happen?

And that's where I could marry it to some of the insights that were coming from Skowronek's work and Shefter's work about how patronage politics worked, and particularly about the impact of the Civil War on American state building, which I actually don't think Skowronek says enough about. But that's the Charles Tilly influence on me, once again, that comes out of my grounding in comparative politics. Work in comparative history helped me understand that war is a major driver of state formation, and so if you're going to believe that, then you have to ask, well, what wars has America fought? And it turns out that the biggest one was the Civil War about itself.

Schickler: One of the other things that *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers* is noted for is this shift or apparent shift to a polity-focused approach. How big a shift was that actually? Do you feel like in some ways your early work already had that?

Skocpol: Yeah, it did, because if you go back to *Bringing the State Back In*, we talked not just about state autonomy, but about how the institutions of a political system can shape the ways in which political alliances form and the ways in which social groups understand their interests, and we call that the Tocquevillian side of things, rather than the Weberian or the Otto Hinze side.

I felt a new term was needed. I'm kind of wary about terms, I'm not a discourse analyst, but it was clear at that point that people were taking "state-centered" as meaning the state is the only actor. And since that's never what was meant, I wanted a term that would enable me to reemphasize that both strands have to be involved in the analysis. You have to ask, how bureaucratic is the state, how independent is the resource base, are there communities of officials like Dan Carpenter studies that have their own worldview and their own capacity to act together? That's state autonomy, it's a variable, it's not a given. And then you have to ask, well, what is the pattern of the party system and the institutional structure of representation or authority, and how does that privilege some kinds of social groups and demands versus others? Both of those perspectives entered into the analysis in *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND THE TEA PARTY

Schickler: Theda, a lot of your recent work has drawn on historical materials and other kinds of data collection efforts to study contemporary problems in American politics, so I want to talk a little bit about that. Maybe start with the work on civil engagement, including *Diminished Democracy*, what led you to that topic, and also talk about the distinctive approach in terms of building these new data sets that you took on in that work.

Skocpol: Well, there are different philosophies that I think scholars have in their careers. Some develop an important insight and elaborate on it through their entire career. And there are some advantages to that; we could think of people who've done that very well. My approach is very, very different. The real world and to some degree academic debates throw up issues, and I get

curious about explaining something or I think I've got a better way to explain something other people are arguing about, and I try to move on to a new substantive question about new changes in history, new ways in which government, politics, and society interact, to explore the next set of questions.

Sometimes people say, how do you get from revolutions to studying volunteer groups in American history? Well, they're all puzzles about how organized political action unfolds and to what end, and what shapes it. So in the case of the civic engagement work, it was really the birth of the whole social capital debate that my colleague, Bob Putnam, launched.

He's the sociologist in the pair, I'm the political scientist (*laughs*), he started in political science and I started in sociology. We're good friends and we work on a lot of the same things, but he was launching the whole social capital thing and he was treating it mainly in terms of individual attitudes and local social networks.

Meanwhile, I was coming off the work on *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*, and I was aware from that work that from the nineteenth century on, there were vast voluntary associations in the field in the United States. By vast I mean millions of people across the whole country, hundreds of thousands to millions, operating organizationally at the national, state, and local levels. I knew that because I'd studied the veterans' organizations like the Grand Army of the Republic, and the women's groups like the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the National Congress of Mothers that became the PTA.

So while Bob was introducing the idea that it was all local and interpersonal and suggesting an image of change in the United States where you go from the local and interpersonal to the national, I realized that that's not right. So out of that came an effort to launch a new study. I assembled a team of students and we set out to do something that I thought at first would be easy (*laughs*), which is to assemble a list of all the large voluntary membership groups, apart from churches and political parties, that had already ever existed in the United States from the Revolution to the present; the present then was 1990.

Well, there was no source for this, there was no data set, there was no way to look it up on a computer, there was no list, so what we had to do is just read history books and try to identify large numbers of organizations. We decided they had to have enrolled one percent or more of the adult population as members. It took years to come up with what was ultimately a list of 58 groups.

That was just an absolutely fascinating project, I have to say. It took detective work, it took ingenuity, and it took me into one of my great hobbies, which is going through antique malls looking for old reports. We met old men and women maintaining archives of groups that were on their death bed. We just had a great time and it generated an amazing set of data that are about organizations, not about individuals.

The social capital literature was analyzing to death the General Social Survey from the 1970s to the present to get all these individual answers from national surveys. Well, you can't do that if you want to understand Americans' organizational affiliations before the 1970s, which is exactly what we wanted to do. So we figured out a way to find organizational records that gave membership numbers, that gave the numbers of local units and state units in these federated groups, and eventually wrote journal articles as well as books that tracked the way in which, I think uniquely in the United States of America, vast federated membership associations that were voluntarily created and expanded shaped a lot of civic life and politics—stretching from the period around the Civil War, coming into their own after the Civil War, through the mid-twentieth century. Thereafter, many of them went into a fairly abrupt decline from the 1960s on.

The last part of the research was why that late twentieth-century decline happened. It actually left Americans, as I put it, with more organizations but fewer members. And with organizations that operated either just nationally or just locally rather than the kinds of things that bridged those

levels in the past. That project was historical curiosity and really using every conceivable method we could use, we, the students and I, to find the data sources and to code them systematically.

Schickler: A lot of your work is focused on the rise of the conservative movement, the movement of Republicans to the right, and one piece of that is your project and book on the Tea Party (*The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism*). Among other things, that involved field work....

Skocpol: It did, a brand new method for me.

Schickler: And not just field work, but field work of a Harvard professor with all the assumptions that go with that, and Tea Party conservatives. So talk a little bit about that experience: How you were able to get access to these individuals, and gain enough trust to do this kind of research, and what you learned from it.

Skocpol: That's another project that grew out of just plain curiosity. Let's go back to the first two years of the Obama presidency. I'm a political scientist, a number of us were studying that presidency and ended up writing about it, but there was also this Tea Party thing that emerged and it was pretty obviously a big deal because it involved a lot of people dressing up in colonial costumes and going out to demonstrations, and it was affecting Republicans. It was obviously causing them to just say no to Obama, to unleash many of the forces that have now come to fruition eight to ten years later.

Both Vanessa Williamson (then a graduate student in Government at Harvard) and I were curious about it. And I want to underline that we were *curious*. We really didn't know what this thing was. And we spent absolutely no time on definitional arguments. A lot of other people were saying, well, is it a social movement or is it an AstroTurf movement where rich people are just creating something for show? We just brushed all that aside and decided we were going to use every empirical method known to political science as quickly as we could.

But then we realized you've got to do more than that. Vanessa actually had gotten to know the Tea Party leader in eastern Massachusetts and had attended some meetings. I realized that I was arguing politically with somebody online who was a member of the Tea Party in Virginia, so we hatched this idea that we're going to try to go and have face-to-face meetings with grass-roots Tea Party people in several regions. Ultimately, we also documented with some Harvard undergraduates there were about 900 Tea Parties formed all over the United States, voluntary groups. What were these groups? We didn't know that, and this upsurge of grass-roots organizing really wasn't expected, because we had earlier concluded that most American civic life was not based on face-to-face meetings at the local level connected to national things anymore, so this seemed new.

We used every device we could figure out to get into a personal conversation with Tea Party people and convince them that we would treat them with respect, that we just wanted to come and hear their story. Sometimes it didn't work, because, for example, if you Google me you find out very quickly that I'm a liberal intellectual, in my citizen capacity. But I had relationships that I cultivated in Virginia, mostly by just convincing people that there was a difference between research and politics, that we really wanted to learn about their activism.

I remember telling the guy I was arguing with in Virginia, "We're learning from the Massachusetts Tea Partiers, but we know we need to talk to Tea Party people in another part of the country," and he writes back and he says, "Well, those are a bunch of RINOs" [Republicans in Name Only]. And he talked his local Tea Party into letting us come down there by saying, "They're liberals, but they're not so bad." The key to this was my personal tie to him, even just an online tie.

You can just learn so much from talking to political actors, nonelite political actors, face to face, because they'll tell you their story. They told us how they got to know the Tea Party, how they formed local groups. These are structural questions, but we just said, "Tell us how you heard about the Tea Party. We're impressed that you're active," which is true, didn't lie. "Tell us how that happened."

And that is a lesson that I now teach many of my liberal-minded undergraduate students, who are going out and doing field work: Don't be afraid. You may be able to talk to conservative people as long as you can get into a situation where they don't think you're trying to lord it over them and you're prepared to listen. I think a lot of times people in academia assume that everybody out there is going to hate us no matter what. It's a little bit a matter of treating them like they're adults and explaining the distinction that you make between research and your own citizen activities, and then some will accept that and some won't, but that's no different from any realm of life, right?

THE KOCH BROTHERS, DONALD TRUMP, AND THE SCHOLARS STRATEGY NETWORK

Schickler: If it's possible to have a more controversial subject to study than the Tea Party, it might be the Koch brothers (*laughs*).

Skocpol: I haven't talked to the Koch brothers. I don't think they would.

Schickler: So here you're trying to study a network or consortium of super wealthy donors, where it seems like what they thrive on most is secrecy. How do you go about trying to study that and getting leverage on that?

Skocpol: Once again, I put together a research group, and in this case, we realized there was a lot of muckraking journalism out there, and if you simply went through all the journalistic sources left and right, and put together databases on what they claimed, a lot of times journalists are pretty creative at ferreting things out. In the case of the Koch seminars, these are these right-wing millionaires and billionaires who have built up an entire network that's captured the Republican Party, its economic policies anyway, its tax policies. The things that have just passed, in the first year of the Trump presidency, are Koch dreams. The dismantling of the Environmental Protection Agency, the privatization of public education, all of these are things that these organized millionaires and billionaires on the right have been preparing to get Congress and state legislatures to do for a long time.

Once again, the principle is organizational analysis. Everybody else out there is saying it's a question of money. Money matters in politics, but how money is spent matters more. We don't have perfect data on how much money each millionaire or billionaire is giving to either the right or the left, it's just not there, and it's never going to be, but what we could do is discover the organizations that are part of the Koch universe that channel money to other organizations on the right. We also examine the liberal millionaires and billionaires in the Democracy Alliance who channel money to other organizations on the left.

We build up databases of those organizations, we look at their budgets and we look at the people who are leading them, and then we figure out, where did those people come from and where are they going to? Let me give you an example. One of the issues about the Koch network is that the Koch brothers themselves, Charles and David, didn't like Donald Trump. So they did not endorse him for president, and for some people that's evidence that there's a split. Well, funny thing is, once Donald Trump wins the presidency, which nobody really thought he was going to, the Koch network had lots of people to offer to be installed in his administration, and Trump didn't

have his own, so he took them. Because we had studied the building up of those Koch network organizations, and the careers of their people, we knew exactly who Trump was plugging in and what ideas they were bringing into the Trump administration.

You can't hide the people, and even something as simple as the Wayback Machine on the internet, or LinkedIn biographies, will give you data on the movement of people, and that's in some ways even better than the movement of money.

Schickler: You mentioned Donald Trump (*laughs*)—hard not to mention Donald Trump. Can you talk a little bit about your current research on Trump voters?

Skocpol: The earlier work that is still ongoing. We call it the Shifting Train Project, where we're trying to understand how things have been reorganized on the right and left. We discovered the growth of this Koch network that is not just big-money donors but organizations that can mobilize activists, and money, at the state and local levels as well as the national level, so that helps us understand why the Republican Party has become so enamored of big tax cuts for the rich, getting rid of health care through Obamacare, and ideally, if they get their way, eventually dismantling Social Security and Medicare. These are not popular ideas. Standard political science that says that elected politicians only do what voters want is just not going to explain where these ideas come from. So our work on these donor networks and the organizations they've built helps us understand that.

But along comes Donald Trump in 2016, and that threw off yet another challenge that would have to be understood because, all right, he really was not endorsed by the Koch network. We can draw on the earlier work to understand a lot of what happens after Trump becomes elected and becomes president, but it still doesn't really help us understand what's going on at the local level in the way that the Tea Party work helped eight years ago.

So after the election was over, it was really just days after, three professors got together here at Harvard—Mary Waters in the Sociology Department, somebody I teach with, she studies immigration; Kathy Swartz, who's a health economist at the School of Public Health; and me, with this history of studying these social movements and civic groups and organizations in politics. We decided that we would, once again, go out there and find out what's going on, and we dreamed up this idea of taking two counties apiece in Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Ohio and Wisconsin, that voted for Trump, and getting to know them very well over a two- to four-year period.

In some ways, it's similar to the Tea Party work but it's broader because the idea was to go into these counties, literally travel to them. We're not so much talking to voters, we can't conduct surveys, what we're doing instead is talking to the key leaders of local institutions and groups. So newspaper editors, business leaders and top employers, political and civic leaders, the leaders of the healthcare system because health care is important in all of these counties. The idea is to see how the debates in Washington and the Trump presidency play down on the ground and how that changes over time.

To my surprise, there turned out to be anti-Trump resistance movements, grass-roots movements like the Tea Party but on the center left, organized in all of these counties, even though they're quite conservative places in some cases. So it's fascinating work and in a way it allows me to put together what's happening on the ground with the more national study of the organizations changing on the left and right.

For example, it really turns out that just like the first two years of Obama's presidency was a period of effervescence on the grass-roots right, with Tea Parties forming outside the Republican Party, but able to pressure it and change it, we're in a period right now where there are thousands of local Indivisible or other kinds of anti-Trump resistance groups forming, pretty spontaneously at the local level, outside the Democratic Party for the most part, but likely to change what the

Democratic Party is doing locally and maybe nationally. These are similar moments, where a president and Congress take office, determined to change the country's direction, and citizens on the opposite side say, wait a minute, that's not what I want for America! And they organize.

The ongoing counties project will involve things like talking to the business people, who in many places say that their biggest problem in getting workers is due to the opioid crisis. Or the healthcare system, what are they grappling with in a period where the signals from Washington and the states are changing constantly? And what happens when immigration restrictions are put on in counties outside of big cities that need more people and, in some cases, have immigrant groups working in agriculture or particular industries? So those are the kinds of things, it's very bottom up, not so much man in the street, but local leaders. And then identifying the puzzles that are playing out in this period. We will probably write several different kinds of things, we're just grappling with that.

It's been a big effort just to visit these places. It takes two or three days at each to get to know them at all. But I don't use interviews for individual reductionist purposes, I use them to get a sense of how people see the lay of the land, who they're relating to. In the case of a new Indivisible-type resistance movement, I want to know, "How'd you form, how'd you meet the other people here?" And an interview, I think sometimes it's hard for social scientists to understand this, an interview can be a source of structural data. What ties my work together over the decades is my interest in organizations.

Schickler: Speaking of organizations, one of your innovations in recent years has been the formation of the Scholars Strategy Network. What do you see its purpose as being, its goals as being?

Skocpol: First of all, it's not just me. There's a whole group of actually largely political scientists, but political scientists of the same ilk that don't care that much about disciplinary boundaries. We formed it in 2009, really figured out what we were doing in 2011, and the idea is to have a national federated organization on the grounds that having a presence in regions and states and university centers all across the country is important in American public life. The idea is to take the richness of ideas and policy-relevant knowledge that exists in America's colleges and universities and do a better job of translating it into things that can influence public discussions and can get facts and ideas to policy makers.

If you step back and you look at American politics of the last 50 years, there really has been a collapse of the bridges between the universities and public life. Many people would say, well, that's because the right has attacked universities. It's deeper than that because I think as American academia grew into the world's most magnificent array of colleges, universities, and research programs, and that's what happened in the post-World War II period, it also became very specialized and ingrown. Academics in one part of the university have no idea what others are even talking about, and the bridges fell down between many of those specialties and Washington, DC, and state capitals. The collapse is on both sides. So the idea here was to create a membership group, coming out of my work on membership associations, the central structural insight, and allow academics—without quitting their day jobs, without going to work for a think tank, without going to Washington or a state capital—to join the Scholars Strategy Network and translate their work into two-page briefs written in plain English. We then use these to help people write op-eds and form ties to civic associations. For example, voting researchers, we've connected them with the League of Women Voters, and some of our members have gone and spoken at their conventions, and handed out our two-pagers that summarize in everyday language, without dumbing down, the results of sophisticated research projects. And we now have, I think it's now 30-some chapters growing all over the country, and deliberately outside just the liberal areas: a powerful chapter in

Oklahoma; one in Georgia; one in Utah, a really vibrant one in Utah; and with a little bit of help they can weave ties to even Republican legislators in many places, and they have done so.

GENDER IN ACADEMIA

Schickler: I want to talk a little bit more about life in academia. One facet of that has to do with gender and being a woman in academia. What was it like, first as a graduate student, and then assistant professor at Harvard?

Skocpol: It was great as a graduate student because I came to graduate school at the time of the Vietnam War, so actually the gender balance had suddenly changed—suddenly, at least in the Sociology Department. I think I arrived just at the time they stopped counting graduate study for deferment. So it was 40% female. Ultimately, some of us went back and did a study of the Harvard Sociology Department and discovered that women had always been in the Ph.D. program, they just hadn't gotten jobs after they were finished. It was exciting because women were newly assertive.

There was the feminist movement; we were holding these meetings and engaging in gripes and then doing things about it, and suddenly departments were deciding they needed to hire a woman, usually it was one woman. That's how I got hired as an assistant professor. So it was a moment when everything seemed possible. Everybody got over that pretty fast, though. Because I would say that by the time my generation—the first modern feminist generation—was into jobs, which was an achievement in itself, it became obvious that it was not going to be easy to move up.

And it wasn't easy for me. I ended up being turned down for tenure at Harvard at a time when admittedly it was hard for rising associate professors, as I was, to get tenure. But I had just written a book that had won the top award in the field, I was being offered jobs in all the leading departments, and I was voted down in a tie vote in my department. I reacted to that by filing the first grievance that had been filed inside Harvard University about gender discrimination. It took a very long time to be resolved.

Schickler: Eventually the tenure denial was reversed and after being in Chicago for a period you came back to Harvard. How did that affect your career, life—

Skocpol: Well, it was great to go to the University of Chicago. I have to say the University of Chicago is a very special place then and now. It is a great university, of course, we all know that. But it's a university that doesn't really respect disciplinary boundaries very much. It was founded by German Jews and it values argument. It's the only university I've ever been in where I've been invited to speak in an economics department. Now admittedly, it was so they could tell me why I was wrong, but it's just taken for granted that people will argue there. I was recruited there actually by William Julius Wilson in sociology and Ira Katznelson in political science and I was given a joint appointment. I probably wouldn't have gotten that offer if it had been after my grievance was filed at Harvard. The truth of the matter is that you file a grievance, you're a marked woman.

Schickler: Even though they were going to hire you with tenure, just the sheer fact that you were challenging Harvard at that time?

Skocpol: Yeah, I think it would have been enough to stop it in most places. But I had the offers in hand before I filed the grievance, not just from Chicago but from elsewhere. So I went to Chicago even though my husband did not get a job there. He was a physicist working in New Jersey, but I decided that that's the place I wanted to be and so I commuted. It was a hard way to live, but I loved the University of Chicago, it was a great place to be; I was there for five years. Finally,

after I refused to let Harvard off the hook in resolving my grievance—they wanted me to quit, I'm not going to quit, wouldn't quit, wouldn't let them, they had to decide, I told them they had to decide—they finally did decide, they brought me back. And I came back because my husband, Bill, got a job at Boston University. Otherwise, I might not have left Chicago, I really loved it.

And I was treated very badly at Harvard for the first five years, there's just no question about it. The fact that I'd won a grievance with a presidential appointment was held against me, for sure.

Schickler: And so did that end up playing into the move from Sociology?

Skocpol: Yeah, I came in Sociology, and [the Department of] Government at that time (that's what we call political science at Harvard) would not accept me—even though I'd been a member of the Political Science Department at Chicago, and by then, increasingly thought of myself as a political scientist as well as a sociologist. They made a conscious decision and it was directly related to the grievance, no question, people said so.

But I learned after a little while to just settle down and do my work, work with students. I learned to stop arguing with people, which is hard for me (*laughs*). I'd just stopped arguing and I decided that my approach to the political science department at Harvard would be to go to colloquia and get to know people, always flatter; that's very, very difficult for me. But I did learn that flattery is important. Especially since, if you've been appointed at a university after a protest over gender, you're virtually seen as a witch, at least you were back then, I was. I was blamed for things I didn't even know about, so it was definitely a witchcraft-type thing.

So I finally realized, just calmed down and I realized, "Look, if you're going to make your way here, you have to work with students"—which is my great pleasure, it always has been—"and do your scholarship, so those that are hoping you'll never do anything good again will not get what they want." I was working on *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*. It took a long time, but it ended up being a magnificent accomplishment when it was finally finished. Meanwhile, I learned, you need to just go to things across the university.

I got elected to the Faculty Council, that was outside sociology. I went to political science colloquia and I just smiled at people and cooperated and established a reputation as a constructive person, and so that meant that eventually, when *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers* came out and won the top award in political science, my supporters in the department, who were always there, brought it up for a vote, I think for the third time, and it passed. Then I more or less moved into the Government Department, where I've been quite happily ever since. And by now it's all over; it took 15 years, but it's all fine, people who were very angry at me in the past are no longer angry. I have good relationships with just about everyone involved in this drama who's still with us, and I think my time at Harvard has been good, overall, after a bad stretch.

Schickler: So for women now in academia, say assistant professors or advanced graduate students, what lessons should they take from this history in thinking about their own challenges?

Skocpol: Well, it is different now. There are many more women in academia now, certainly in political science. I can remember attending political science meetings where it was all guys in suits (laughs). It just was, long after it wasn't in sociology. But now I think these disciplines are much more diverse. I'm not saying they're in any perfect place, because we know that's not true. I think my generation of women who were high achievers, who were denied things and fought about it, were on their own in many ways. And that's kind of scary because you do dumb things when you're on your own, I definitely did at times when I was scared. I don't think you have to be scared now, you can network with others.

Then my broader list is really for all graduate students, regardless of gender, race or anything else: make sure you pick a project for your Ph.D. thesis and then your graduate studies that you really care about, and don't let people tell you that you have to do X to get a job, or to get anything. First of all, it's not true. They are older people who are telling you about the world they came out of, not the one you're headed into. You will be well served if you figure out the answers to a puzzle that you think is important and can convey that. That's what I did with my thesis, and was it dangerous? Yes, it was, but it would have been even more dangerous to do something I was bored to tears about, and it wouldn't have opened doors. I do think graduate students now are more afraid, and I don't think they should be.

THE STATE OF POLITICAL SCIENCE TODAY

Schickler: That brings us to the contemporary state of political science. Your work has always been motivated by big substantive questions that have theoretical stakes and often real-world, practical implications. I think the criticism that's made about political science by many people today is that we're asking narrower and narrower questions, hoping that we can nail down some causal effect of some treatment or manipulation, but often disconnected from theory or real-world stakes. So I wanted to get your sense, does that resonate with you?

Skocpol: I think the important thing is not to be captured by any one given method or school of thought. And really, at least graduate students who are in leading programs like Berkeley or Harvard can easily avoid capture. All these major departments have faculty who are working in a variety of ways and excellent ways, who generally respect each other. Students need to realize that they are agents. They can make decisions about what they're passionate about and they can put together the faculty committees, even play faculty against each other (*laughs*).

Every time I go, when I'm in a department, they'll say, "Well, the graduate students would like to meet with you," and I kick the faculty out of the room. And I say, "Look, this is how you should approach your faculty: Listen to them, learn from them, but don't let anybody capture you. Now there are certainly people in all of our departments, we won't use names, who are trying to capture. Who are trying to say, 'I'm the only way forward. This particular technique for figuring out causality is the only one.' Learn from them, and don't listen to that. If you're somebody who cares about substantive questions, recognize that multiple sources of data, multiple methodological approaches are the way to go. And maybe this is the one daring thing I would say: "Recognize that a good enough answer to an important question, important both substantively in the field and in the real world, has more value than a definite answer to a trivial question."

There is a fair amount happening in political science that's wandering off into trivia. I don't think political science, for example, had an inkling about the Donald Trump election. I think the book that Vanessa Williamson and I wrote about the Tea Party offered more insight into the populist, nativist sources of his support than all of the number-crunching models, almost all of which predicted that he would not win. I'm not saying I predicted he would win, I did not, but the truth is, I never said he wouldn't win. I never did that because our research that grew out of that multimethod study of the Tea Party had made me aware of the depth of popular anger on nativist grounds.

Schickler: The last question I want to ask you is, when we were talking before, you mentioned your American identity, your love of America and traveling around America, and I guess it's sort of unusual for an "elite" academic to express that sentiment (*laughs*).

Skocpol: It is, it is indeed.

Schickler: How does that identity affect your life as an academic or how we should think about that in relation to your work and career?

Skocpol: I'm definitely not a citizen of the world, I would not say that. Of course, I enjoy international travel and do a fair amount of it, but I guess it's my age, it's my fascination and love for American history, my sense that this has been one of the most special countries in world history because of our ability to weave together people from all over the world. It's a cosmopolitan way of understanding America. That's why I don't sleep through the night very well in the Trump era, because I agree with the point that many have made that what America is is at stake in this period. I have a lot of faith in most Americans, including some who voted for Donald Trump, that that's not really what they want for the future of this country.

I think this is a wonderful country. I hope it makes it through a rough patch, and is able to renew the vitality of an immigrant-receiving country, innovative, with at least historically an ability to marry individual initiative and social responsibility. We just need to find a new way to do that in a different world. I am unabashedly an American patriot, there's just no question about it.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

E.S. and T.S. are not aware of any affiliations, memberships, funding, or financial holdings that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this interview.

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