

Interviewer: Can you please state your name, title and affiliation?

Dr. Geron: Hi. My name is Kim Geron. I'm professor emeritus of political science at California State University, East Bay.

Interviewer: Great. Thank you. And can you please tell us a bit about your personal background, so specifically where you're from and what was your home or family life like growing up?

Dr. Geron: So I was born in Oakland, California. I grew up in Berkeley, California. My mother was a nurse at Kaiser, and so that's where I was born. Working in the, place where she worked for years. And I say that only because I think that influenced a lot of my development. My mom's being active as a nurse, but also in her union nurses union, and my father being active in his union, which was a longshoremen's union. And both of them kind of instilled in me a sense of social justice at an early age. And supporting workers rights.

Interviewer: And how were you introduced to the field of political science?

Dr. Geron: So I think my trajectory is a little bit different. I went to San Francisco State, in the early, and, I was an Asian-American studies major. So I didn't really, focus on political science courses. And then I stopped going to school in because the draft ended, too. At the time, males were drafted into into the military to go fighting Vietnam. And when that draft formally ended I stopped going to school and I just went to work and started raising a family. And I didn't return to school until when I moved to Los Angeles and I returned as a labor studies major. I'm still very active in labor organizing, labor issues, and then my union the hotel workers union. So, at that time, I was projecting myself to get a degree in labor studies and continue working in the labor movement. But I was encouraged by professors in that program to go on to grad school. And so I literally did the eeny, meeny, miney, moe. I picked political science. I had no background in political science per se, other than any one real politics. And so, that's how I ended up going into political science field at UC Riverside. And that's where I met Anna.

Interviewer: Great. Thank you. And were you a first generation scholar?

Dr. Geron: I think I was, my mom got her nursing license during World War two. She was incarcerated, Japanese-American who were incarcerated during World War Two internment camps. And so one of the ways you could get out of the internment camp was if you agreed to go, join the U.S. military. And so she went to become a nurse in the U.S. military. The war ended before she got to practice that, but she went to a university or college to learn how to become a nurse so that was a closest. My father was just a high school graduate. So I think me and my brother were the first went into immediate family to go to college and get advanced degrees.

Interviewer: And during their undergrad or graduate experience, did you have any mentors along the way?

Dr. Geron: Oh so many. I think the earlier era, you know, so in the- era, I, my role models were professors in Asian-American studies who were involved in the, Asian-American community and got me in my trajectory of getting involved in the Japanese American community for many years on various issues around fighting redevelopment in San Francisco's Japantown and fighting for redress and reparations for those Japanese Americans who had been incarcerated during World War Two. Like my mom and her family, who lost everything. I mean, they were removed and put in these camps. So, I did a lot of work for many, many years in the Japanese-American and Asian American communities. Before I returned to school in. So that was that first generation. And then when I returned, in, to finish my BA, I and my mentors were labor studies professors who were very supportive of my efforts to go on to to grad school. And so when I went to grad school, I think some of my mentors there were in UC Riverside, I think, I don't know if, Anna mentioned these, you know, we so we had our we were more, when we worked together as cohorts to support each other. I wouldn't say I was mentored, per se. I mean, my formal chair was, Max Neiman who was a great professor at urban politics. And he definitely supported my effort s to, to study the, the research topic that I wanted to study. And some of, you know, so we have other great mentor and faculty mentors too. But, mostly I'd say I relied on our, because I was older by then. I was much older than people like Anna, you know, who were coming straight out of grad school, coming straight out of undergrad, into grad school. I had, you know, come back to school after years of being away. So I was in my late s, early s. So I had a different experience. I had family and kids and all these other responsibilities, building off of that.

Interviewer: Can you tell us a little bit more about your graduate school experience?

Dr. Geron: Let's see. So I, UC Riverside is, in a very, kind of unpleasant part of Southern California. It's very hot, very dry. And at the time, I wasn't inspired to live there, so I literally spent all of my graduate years living in Los Angeles and commuting to Riverside, which is about an hour away, when there's no traffic and there's traffic, it's hours, but I was always going against the traffic, so I enjoyed that. So I kind of kept my grounding in community and labor work. I continue to work as a shop steward in my union at a hotel I worked at all the time. I was a graduate student so I never fully bought into being kind of a full time graduate student. I rather was a part time graduate student in the sense that I kind of kept a separate life from, campus life. So I, which I think was great for me to keep my sanity.

Interviewer: And how would you characterize the political and social environment in the US while you were in college or graduate school? And also, were you involved in social or political activism?

Dr. Geron: Well, definitely in the earlier area. I graduated high school in, and I went to a community college, in Oakland called the Grove Street. And we also named it, Black Hampton University because Bobby Seale and and, Huey Newton, who were leaders of the Black Panther Party at that time, had gone there just a few years earlier. And they were very influential still in the politics of that, that college they fought for. And we fought for ethnic studies and black studies and the rights of minority students to get, you know, access to a higher education. So that was kind of my involvement or even at, if you will, at a relatively young age and in, in education, in higher education. And I continue my activism at San Francisco State, when I transferred there working on the campus to form, an Asian student union and, fight for Asian studies and the rights of Asian-American students on campus, as well as in solidarity with, our other Black, brown, and, you know, Native American, student organizations are also forming at the same time. So that's, you know, that earlier phase of my college life. And then in through when I was at Cal State Dominguez Hills in labor studies, we also were active. By then I was active more in my labor union. So I was active a little bit more off campus. But on campus, we supported the efforts to, win rights for students who had been denied access for various reasons, to, public education and also supporting our faculty. Who were fighting for a good contract. And in grad school, I didn't get involved with graduate assistant organizing, but that had started around the early s at UCLA, so pretty close by, and I was fortunate to have taken a year to study at UCLA, in the urban planning program. And when I did that, I got connected with some of the organizers who were doing the grad student organizing work, at which they had a very powerful movement. And it wasn't that quite as strong at UC Riverside, but it was still there. But but by then, I was moving away from taking classes and teaching as an assistant, and was starting to do fieldwork. So the last few years I was less involved in UC Riverside and more doing my field work, about miles away.

Interviewer: Okay. Thank you for sharing this. And can you tell us a little bit about your research trajectory and what was your dissertation topic? What is your current main area of focus, and were there any particular scholars or whose work was influential in your thinking and your research?

Dr. Geron: So, in, I was living in San Jose, which is about an hour north of the city of Watsonville. And In Watsonville a strike took place of cannery workers, primarily women, Mexican women, and, they went on a strike for months where, they basically had to survive on meager strike benefits from the Teamsters union and on their own, community building support work. And so while I was living in San Jose, we helped organize a support team, to build, and fund food to feed a thousand people over months. And I never forgot that they ultimately won their contract and won the victory in. I never forgot what also happened at the same time, which was people were trying to Latinos were also starting to get elected or trying to get elected into the Watsonville City Council and other local farmworker communities. And so when I went to grad school, I had the opportunity to make my research about Latinos getting elected into, these rural farmworker towns. They're called farmworker towns, or Ag-towns in California. And so I studied their trajectory of being, marginalized and excluded from city politics. Decisions were being made about the Latino community, about their schools, about their, you know, education and jobs. And they were totally, excluded from the process because there were no Latinos at the time elected to most of these city councils, even though in most cases, they were the majority population.

Dr. Geron: So it took many years to change that model by, moving to what's called district elections, where people can elect people from their neighborhood as opposed to, you know, like it's citywide, which is where they've had a very difficult time getting elected because even though they were the majority population, the voting population was much smaller than the actual physical population of people. So, I really wanted to study how Latinos. So by the time I started studying in the, Latinos were starting to get elected after they changed some of the rules, to district elections. And so in cities like Watsonville and Salinas, which is about minutes away, I studied, how they got elected, you know, what was the motivations for running and getting elected? But also, did it make a difference for the Latino community? Once Latinos started getting elected to office in each one of the towns? And so that became my research, my dissertation. And I took when I graduated. I took the dissertation, which was narrowly focused on these two cities and conducted a national survey and research on Latinos getting elected around the country. So I went all over the country interviewing Latinos who are now elected at the local level and kind of asking that same question, you know, how did your election begin to

make a difference for the Latino community? If so, you know how. And so, that ended up being, my research for my first book, it's called, which is called Latino Political Power. And I continue that research, along with some other research over the years. And so last year we, along with a colleague, Sharon Navarro from University of Texas at San Antonio, we published a second edition of Latino Political Power, where we updated a lot of information that I had gathered in the early, into our model of how Latinos were doing and faring.

Dr. Geron: And we did some new interviewing of Latinas, because at the time, there were very few Latinas being elected to office. And so years later, more were being elected. So we were fortunate to be able to interview some of them and incorporate their stories into the second edition. So that's been one trajectory is just tracking this process of Latinos getting elected into political office and, being part of that effort to change the conditions in their communities. And then I've also done other research more focused on Asian American politics. And so I've done, and written on, Asian American politics, particularly with some different colleagues like, James Lai. We've studied, Asian-Americans being elected in suburban communities where they've now become majority or near majority in many communities. And, their trajectory to getting elected, kind of similar to Latinos, different communities, but , interesting comparisons. And so we we studied not only their trajectory of getting elected and did it make a difference in some cases, they were, small minority of the population. Others like a place like Cupertino, California, they are the majority of the population or Fremont, California. So comparing the differences between, communities that are predominantly Asian-American and affluent, primarily, but not exclusively, and, areas where maybe they were a small minority of the population that an Asian-American got elected. So, you know, their identity and their public facing messages out of those, modified to get elected in these different contexts. So I think those are I think have been my two major, research projects. I have done some other things, but those are two that I can, you know, identify right now.

Interviewer: And shifting gears a little bit, then what does being a political scientist of color mean to you?

Dr. Geron: Let's see, I think back in the when I first got went to grad school, I think there were so few, if you will, scholars of color that there were literally there were, not that we were the first. There was definitely founders who existed all the way back to the and, but they were small in number. And in the, those of us who were whether we were grad students or recently, getting our jobs, began to focus on building up the influence and reputation of scholars of, of color. And so the, the REP formed, as part of that effort to bring in, the issue of race into political science in a more direct way, creating sections, not only at the Western, but also in APSA, but also

organizations. And so now, those organizations are thriving and, and there's a whole new generations of, of young scholars of color coming into political science because of some of that foundational work. So I think looking back, I think I'm really proud of some of that early work we did to get Asian Americans and Latinos and African Americans and Native Americans and other scholars of color involved in political science, because almost everybody, if you ever interviewed them, always felt isolated on their own, didn't have, very much support on their campus for the research they wanted to do. If it had to do with, it wasn't kind of corporate, mainstream, quantitative research and wanted to do more qualitative or experimental or other types of research that involved, really understanding these communities that we're writing about and not just kind of using data sets to make up broad pronouncement. So that's been important, I think, to see that transition, if you will. And I'm glad to be part of supporting that effort as an elder, kind of on my way out.

Interviewer: And what challenges, if any, have you face throughout your career, either due to your race or chosen field of study?

Dr. Geron: Let's see, it's a good question. I think, I think some of the challenges about my research are more I think studying local communities of color always is never considered real political science. It was considered, a sociology or anthropology or geography, but not political science, even though I was really studying, the actual electoral process and those who ran, to participate in it, both kind of in the formal way of getting elected to office, but also the grassroots organizations that supported these candidates efforts to get elected. And so I always felt a little bit of, pressure to do something a little bit more mainstream that was more, acceptable in the, in : in the discipline. But I always just continue to push through and work with my colleagues who agreed that we needed to push for this type of grassroots, local community electoral based building research that, was lacking. We found, in the discipline, but in terms of my own identity and feeling, maybe, discrimination or prejudice, I think probably less so than others just because of my appearance. I think people don't quite know what I am. I guess five people, you get five different, guesses of what I might be, but, you know, having being hapa or half Japanese , half Eastern European. I haven't felt it in that way. For unfortunately for so many of my colleagues had much more difficult challenges around that or their, their sexual identity or their gender being a hindrance less so for me, I think, least fortunately, and I fortunately ended up in, in a department that was supportive of my research and encouraged me to be active on campus and as well as in my scholarship.

Interviewer: Thank you for sharing that. And in your view, what is necessary in order to further diversify the discipline and make it more equitable and welcoming to scholars of color?

Dr. Geron: I think that's, a super challenging question because especially in this era where, I've seen, even in my university, budget cuts, austerity has really had a big impact on, people teaching. So I can see junior colleagues who are trying to just get their foot in the door by teaching classes, because we're mainly a teaching university. It's very difficult for them to even find stable work. So even though they have a doctorate, they're not able to really find a permanent job. And so I think it's just challenging. But what should younger people do? You know, if people ask me, I encourage people to go on like we have basically an undergraduate program in like the political science department. And I do encourage students to go into grad school and consider getting their doctorates. But I also warn them that, you know, that it's a perilous time journey right now., There's no guarantees of getting a permanent job, so you have to do it because you really love it and you're willing to pivot towards other type of occupations if you're not able to land that job you want in a place you want on a more permanent basis, or accept the fact that you're going to be teaching at multiple campuses.

Dr. Geron: Still teaching what you love and maybe not doing it at one location and not being able to super get grounded somewhere. And I think that's particularly true for, our faculty of color who are going to face even more challenges. Our women faculty just getting their foot in the door? I think it's going to continue to be super challenging. It's not going to get any easier, especially with the cuts to funding, I think, that are coming, maybe from the federal government towards universities who don't want to go along with the latest administration's edicts and authority issues. So I think, that's and in California, even though we're a wealthy state, in theory, in real life, my college system is being cut %. Our enrollment is down at our campus, so that means we're getting cut another % because we're not meeting our target. So that's already a % cut. Well, some of that % cut is going to impact hiring, tenure track faculty in my own department. We've two people have left for other jobs, and we've been unable to fill those positions, which in the past, you could always fill a position if somebody retired or left. There's no guarantee of those kinds of positions being filled on a permanent basis. So those are some of the kind of economic, you know, professional challenges that I see people facing particularly our junior faculty of color. I'm hoping things are better in other states, but they're not very great, at least in my state, California.

Interviewer: And in addition to existing diversity, equity and inclusion programing, what is your advice to associations like APSA or WPS A, on how to best support scholars of color in their profession as they approached certain milestones in their career like dissertation completion, tenure and promotion, career advancement?

Dr. Geron: You know, I think it so much of what happens on those career advancement issues are locally specific, meaning, I'm not sure which can help somebody get tenure promotion, even with a letter of support of being a participant here. So I really think what what we can do is, some of these association is really provide training and advice, and support for faculty that are in those processes. But a lot of it has to take place I think at the local level with professional development centers and being engaged with our colleagues on our campus to help them. I sit this year, on the university's tenure promotion committee, and I just anguish over some of the people who came, got hired during, in and around Covid. And are expected to raise a family, have new kids, raise a family publish like crazy. Do all the service on campus. And if they don't, you know, they're viewed as too some kind of failure when in real life they've done as much as they can do. To kind of produce what they can produce. But it's intellectual work or service work on the campus. And I think we should be rewarding those people and not becoming gatekeepers. And that's super challenging. Role that I find myself in even this year. Just because I'm more of a senior faculty member. So we're trying to do what we can to educate people on the front end, but everybody's life circumstances are so challenging that, even after Covid, it hasn't gotten a lot easier and so much has gotten more challenging because expectations are just as high as they were before Covid. But I think we haven't readjusted to reflect the current reality. So, I mean, that's just one example of some of the challenges.

Dr. Geron: But I think, if APSA can continue to provide workshops and training at these conferences, we have to figure out a way of getting people here. On the workshop I was at just before this one person couldn't come because of a fear of flying, with the current administration state others couldn't get funding on. Another panel I was on. So I don't know how we support grad students getting funding to come. Because it is costly and it's not cheap to come to a hotel and fly. You know, it's a few thousand dollars, I don't know, for association has those kinds of resources, but I think providing more scholarships and supporting students grassroots efforts to come and even undergraduates efforts to come. I was just with an undergraduate in a workshop, and it's great to see undergraduates here, but unless the university can provide that resources, they're probably not going to come and learn from us, you know, from those in the field.

Interviewer: So shifting gears again, then you have held another a number of leadership positions in the profession, including at APSA. And what, in your view, makes a good leader?

Dr. Geron: I think a good leader first has to start by being a good listener and being empathetic. And I think if you're not empathetic and you're not a good listener, you're going to end up being the kind of leader that has probably good ideas but is probably not going to be able to incorporate and unite people. And if you're not able to unite people to move in a certain direction, then I

think you're just a smart person. But you may not be the leader that we need in this in this period where I think it's so important to engage with people and involved them in the decision making process and not feel like you have to have all the answers. As a so-called leader, thank you so much. And can you tell us a bit about your experience with APSA or WPSA conferences? Any advice for junior scholars going to these conferences either? Oh, I think it's important for them to keep coming whether it's WPSA or Midwest and Southern. I've gone to the southern a couple times and each of the conferences have their own vibe, their own sensibilities, and I think it's good for junior faculty and grad students to try and go to different conferences and meet different colleagues. You know, you're going to if you're a young person of color, you're probably going to come up against, racist colleagues who will tell you your work is, is not scholarly. But in a sense, I think, even though it's traumatic, I think it's important for folks to hear that and also to push back to to not just, accept what somebody's saying as it's gospel. You know, I was on a panel I listen to at a panel where my colleague was talking about, even as an Asian American is feeling like, they're always, kind of on a side or an adjunct to other, groups of people and, and that and putting more forward and foregrounding whatever your identity is or your issue that you're studying is, and centering it, and finding its links to other, other issues and an intersection where I think is so important. And I think that's what conferences can do. I think most of us live in a bubble of our departments, and if you're a grad student or a junior faculty member, you're living in that bubble of your department and maybe your your college or university, whether it's community college or, you know, a PhD granting university, there is a bubble sense. And coming here, I think gets you a little bit out of that bubble.

Dr. Geron: I wish we had more intersectional conferences. You know, that where like, for example, we're meeting the same time as the Asian American Studies conference is happening. It's in Boston this year, and usually I would try and go to both, but they're they're banked around, WPSA's banked around, Easter because it's cheaper to stay in the hotels like on Easter weekend. But that's the same thing. That's true for Asian American studies. So a lot of my colleagues here would be at that panel presenting more social science perspectives and not being there. They're mainly getting kind of a more limited like humanities perspective in Asian-American science, because that's predominant, group of folks there. But they they're open to social scientists. But if we don't show up, they're not going to, you know, put us on their panels. And I think that's similar for other organizations, you know, NCOBPS, the National Black Association of Political Scientists. I just wish we could partner with them for a conference WPSA and NCOBPS have one together, I think. I just think the synergy and all of the challenges that would present would also be super positive experience, because most of us need to learn more from those colleagues who are doing that work, and they're not always are not able to find funding to come to a conference like WPSA and go to that conference. So we lose out on all that intellectual knowledge. And I would say that same for even some of the other, conferences that happen. So, that would be one suggestion is to try and find ways that we can bring folks together, maybe not

formally on APSA or WPSA but at a separate thing that we could create together, where there's some joint synergies.

Interviewer: And is there anything else you would like to share with us today?

Dr. Geron: No, thank you for the opportunity to share some of my experiences. I think, there's there's a lot to be learned from so many people, and I hope you interview them. As to degree you can.

Interviewer: Thank you so much. That concludes our interview today.

Dr. Geron: Thank you.