

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

Jessica Lavariega Monforti: Sure, Jessica Lavariega Monforti. I am the Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs at California State University, Channel Islands.

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

Jessica Lavariega Monforti: Sure, so I'm a native New Yorker living here now in California, and the water's just always on the wrong side, as far as I'm concerned, but the weather makes up for that. I grew up in a pretty working class family. My father was an auto mechanic. My mother was a hairdresser on and off, sometimes just cutting hair in our kitchen, and then sometimes working more formally. I have one younger brother, and growing up, we were just really very family-oriented, and there weren't very many folks in my family that pursued higher education. I think at that time, it was really common that people just went into trades, and that's what most of my family did. My dad did some sort of technical school, but ended up mostly being an auto mechanic for his whole career. But I was always pretty clear that I was going to college. My mother made that very clear from a very, very young age for me, and I think that is what made me believe I could do it, because there was never any question in her mind that I was going to go.

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

Jessica Lavariega Monforti: I think probably since the time I was about five, I knew that I, or I thought I knew, that I wanted to be a lawyer. And so not ever having met a lawyer or known a lawyer in my life, I just went through school thinking social studies was not knowing what a college major was or what a field was, right? I was just like, I loved history, and I loved the social sciences. And in my junior year, I went and took one of those career tests at the guidance counselor's office, and I said, "What do you want to do?" And I said, "I want to be a lawyer." And they said, "Oh, well, you should major in political science." And I was like, "Great, I have no idea what that is, but that sounds like a plan." And that's really what I thought I was going to do. And no one really ever explained what political science was. It was just really sort of a pathway to the next thing

I needed to do, which was law school in my mind. And when I was in undergrad at Florida State University, I had to take a required research methods class. And I was really upset about it, actually. I thought, man, I thought I chose political science, so I never had to do math again. Little did I know how quantitative of a field this would become over time. And I took that class, and I actually, for a kid who was, I was sort of told my whole life I wasn't really great at math. And I had a lot of math anxiety. And there was something that happened in that class that all of a sudden it became clear to me that I could tell stories with statistics, that it was just another language that I could use to give voice to questions and populations that I thought were important. And so all of a sudden I went from being really terrified to be in this class to being one of the best students in the class. And I was sort of in disbelief about it myself, to be honest.

Jessica Lavariega Monforti: And I went to office hours like all good students because I had lots of questions about what we were doing. And the faculty member asked me, hey, what are your post-graduation plans? So I'm going to law school. And she's like, no, you're not. You're not going to law school. And I was like, why not? I'm like, I wanted to go to law school since I was five years old. And she said, have you ever met a lawyer? And I said, no. She's like, you should really do that. You should go and you should meet a lawyer and you should have an internship. And you should see what lawyers do. She's like, because I'm having this conversation with you and it feels like you really love research. And not that you can't do research as a lawyer, but it's a very different kind of thing. And she was just really priming me to go to graduate school, which I never had heard of, nor had I considered. I didn't know what a PhD was. And it's really because of her that it changed the entire trajectory of my life, of my career. And so it was really impactful not just to have that class, but then to have an internship that let me know, actually, yeah, I don't want to be a lawyer. And it was truly a transformative experience. I figured out not only did I not want to be a lawyer, but I also really didn't like being in the politics. I liked thinking about the politics and talking about the politics because I was working in a legislative affairs office for a secretary of education. And I was like, oh, this isn't what I thought it was. Oh, most of these lawyers are never in a courtroom. Most of these lawyers are sitting in offices by themselves, writing up legal briefs. I'm like, oh, man, I don't want to do that. And so I ended up sitting down with that professor and she wrote down six schools. She's like, you're going to apply to these PhD programs. And I just did what she told me to do, honestly. Somehow, 20 some odd years later, here I am.

Interviewer: And to clarify what you mentioned earlier, you are a first generation scholar.

Jessica Lavariega Monforti: Oh, yes. First generation scholar, I was-- I tell my students now, I'm all the things. I was first generation scholar. I was a Pell student. I went to community college first. As a woman of color, I didn't have a lot of folks in my community that could help me kind of figure out where I was supposed to go either. And it was really interesting because as an undergrad, I mean, these were all the reasons I wanted to study law, was to help the people in communities that I had grown up in. But I just saw, man, there's another way, right? There's another way to engage in community uplift through education and paying forward what folks had done for me, frankly. And so I ended up taking this very kind of different pathway. And I think over the course of my career, there have been times where I have made choices about how I want to be in my career that is counter to what is expected in the field because of who I am. I went to a top 10 political science PhD program at Ohio State. I think people assumed that I would want to go to an R1, that I would want to pursue a very sort of traditionally prestigious career. And that was not at all what I was interested in.

Interviewer: And can you tell us a little bit more about your undergraduate experience at Florida State and then graduate experience at Ohio State, you mentioned?

Jessica Lavariega Monforti: Yes. Yeah. Great. So I went to Florida State as a transfer student. I lived in the scholarship dorms. So I was technically off campus. And I was in huge classrooms. And actually, I loved it. I had started out at a much smaller institution and found that that wasn't quite right for me. The classes that really made me interested, some were in political science, but some were in sociology, some were in social work. The classes that were about identity are the classes that drew me in. And at that time in the 90s, there weren't that many classes in political science that were talking about those kinds of questions. But I knew that that would be the thing that interested me. I had an opportunity to take an internship class with a super famous political scientist at that time. And it was-- we would meet once a week. But then I would go to my internship. And I had two internships because why not? If I had the opportunity, let's do it all. So one was the Legislative Affairs Office for the Secretary of Education for the state of Florida, because I was in Tallahassee. So it was a perfect opportunity to be engaged in state-level politics. And the other was I got an internship where I was doing research for the Florida Commission on the Status of Women. And it was maybe one of the most interesting undergraduate experiences I had. I was given sort of free rein by the director to develop a research project that meant something to me. At that time, my mother had had an accident and had a head injury. And because it's not a physical disability that people could see, people didn't understand it. And she faced a lot of barriers. And that interested me. And so I did an entire study on women with head injuries in the state of Florida, what

kind of care they could expect, what were the policy implications for women with disabilities that were unseen.

Jessica Lavariega Monforti: And I was like, oh, this is the thing. This is what I want to do. And we got to send it to the governor and we've got to present it to the Florida legislature. And I was like, there's another way to do this thing that I was at first interested in. And so those experiences really shaped my thinking. And I was also able to engage in service learning projects. So one of the other things that I did when I was at Florida State was I was able to teach English to Spanish speaking migrants picking strawberries in the fields. And that was, enlightening is not quite the right word. At that time, there were many folks from Central America who had come to Northern Florida working in the fields who were children soldiers in the civil wars in the late 80s, early 90s. And what I realized through that experience was, I'm just trying to teach you English, but they didn't know how to read and write in Spanish. They had been pulled out of schools. Their countries were disrupted. And I was like, oh, this politics thing isn't just theoretical. This is what happens when policy actually lives out in people's lives. And so I did that for about a year. And it really started to shape the way I thought about the world, the way I thought about myself in that world, and shape the kinds of questions I was interested in, the kinds of populations I was interested in studying. And so I got into Florida to Ohio State, the Ohio State University. If you don't say the "the," they take your PhD away. And so, you know, as a girl from the East Coast, Ohio was like another world. I very much felt like I did not fit in for a variety of reasons.

Jessica Lavariega Monforti: Ohio State is a university at that time that had about 60,000 students, but only 900 of us were Latino out of that 60,000. That was the first time I had been in an environment where I was such a minority, right? In New York, everybody who I knew was an ethnic something. Black people, white people, Jewish people, everybody. Everybody was an ethnic something. Nobody was saying, "I'm just white," or, "I'm just American." And then I went to Ohio and everybody was like, "Well, I'm just white." And I'm like, "Well, white from where?" They're like, "From Ohio." And I was like, "What does that mean?" Right, so from that perspective, I had a very difficult time understanding the culture of the place. And then they also didn't understand me, right? And so I had a very rough time in graduate school, just to be perfectly frank. We had a very large cohort, but I was the only Latina. I believe I'm only the second Latina to get a PhD from that program. And I know the first, so that should tell us something, right? About what was happening there. It was a highly methodological program at that time, but I was going to study gender and there were good gender scholars that were there. And just trying to find community while I was there, I went to an office at that time. I have no

idea what it's called now. It was called the Ethnic Student Services Office. And I went there and I was like, "Can you like tell me, like, where are people of color around here? Like, where can I find them?" And they just looked at me and they said, "Well, this is for Black people. Like you don't belong in this office." And I was like, "What?" It hadn't occurred to me because of where I was from. I mean, ethnic people look like everything in New York and look like everything in Florida. It didn't occur to me that they would not understand. And so that was a radicalizing experience for me.

Jessica Lavariega Monforti: And all of a sudden I went from just wanting to study gender to just wanting to study identity more broadly. And also making a very clear choice at that time to never just pass for white. To always want to say, "I am a Latina. We also look like this." And sometimes that comes with privilege and sometimes that actually is a double-edged sword because people say things to you thinking that you're white, that they wouldn't say if they knew who you were, things like that. I had graduate student colleagues at the time just put an O at the end of every word when they spoke to me, because that's how you speak Spanish. Or make references to ties to the mafia or the mob because I was from New York. I had a faculty member in a classroom say that, "My family probably came to this country on a dilapidated raft." And I did not speak English like a native English speaker. And so all of those things were like, "Wow, is this what the country is? Like, have I been living in a bubble and this is what it is? Or is it the opposite? Is this just a weird place?" And I ended up really having to find my people. And the truth is there weren't many of us. And I was very lucky, very lucky to find a faculty member who had a dual appointment in political science and Africana and African-American studies. William E. Nelson Jr. who has now passed, who just saw me floundering. And he was like, "Just come here." Just African-American scholar from Memphis who And I was sort of adopted by the Black scholars in political science and by Nelson in particular. And he made a decision to learn Latino politics so that he could teach it to me. And he served as my dissertation chair. And I would not be here. I would not have a degree without Nelson. And I am quite certain that I am not the only one that would say that. There is quite a large number of us that owe our degrees. And not because we couldn't do the work, but we needed somebody who was going to advise us, someone who understood the literature, someone who was going to open their networks to other scholars to sponsor us in the research. And he never made it easy. And we're all grateful for that. But he always made it entertaining. Anybody who knew Nick would know that he was a character, but he kept us on our toes and he made sure we were prepared. And I deeply appreciate that.

Interviewer: Did you have any other mentors along the way that made an impression on you or your career?

Jessica Lavariega Monforti: I would say Nick is probably the most influential. I would then say, when I was becoming a professional, moving out of graduate school, I was able to create a network of peers who have been influential. And I think we were influential on each other and on each other's survival in the discipline. And so some of those folks are from graduate school and some of those folks are from beyond that I've met through conferences or things like that. But certainly, I think the folks that you meet along the way who you share that sort of common core interest in questions of power and politics become your community, right? That's your tribe, for lack of a better word. And so I would say, from graduate school, there's Melanie Price and Khalilah Brown-Dean and others, and I would say Melissa Michelson. I mean, there's just a whole crew of people that those are my go-to people. Adam McGlynn, he was a colleague of mine when I was at the University of Texas system and we had a buddy system to help each other survive being junior faculty, right? And so all of those folks have helped along the way. It's interesting though, when you're doing that mentorship with peers, you are feeling your way through the dark a little bit, right? And I think we were, but it worked out. It worked out.

Interviewer: And how would you characterize the political and social environment in the US while you were in graduate school and were you involved in any social or political activism at that time?

Jessica Lavariega Monforti: Well, I was in graduate school. So we're talking late 90s, early 2000s. I was active in the sense that I was, really trying to inform communities that I was a member of about how to maneuver the political spaces that we found ourselves in. So just a few examples, in Columbus, Ohio, there was at that time pretty significant poverty right around the area of the university and all of the Black and brown folks lived in pretty horrible housing conditions that surrounded the institution. Now that's all been gentrified and it's beautiful and you can walk and it's lovely. But at that time it was not. I mean, there was one year, my gosh, I wanna say it was year three of my program. I was living off campus, walking to campus, and there was a homeless man who had died from being frozen overnight. And so I worked with Habitat for Humanity and I did home inspections and I talked to those homeowners about what's available to them, how can they act, how can they organize. I did very similar kinds of things for migrant workers and workers in factories at that time. And that sort of followed me throughout my career.

I spent about 10 or 12 years in deep South Texas along the border and I did a lot of organizing. And trying to inform with data so that they could tell a different kind of story that wasn't just one person's story. They could have the data to tell the larger story and then they could enrich that data with the personal narratives of the people who were involved. And I hope that helped. I'm not sure that it did, but I hope that helped. Things changed over the course of my career, especially as I had my own children. I was less able to do those kinds of things and then just turned my attention to the schools which they really loved. So I've been quite an advocate for students with disabilities in particular, but also for ethnic and racial minorities in schools. And I've spent a good amount of time doing that work.

Interviewer: Thank you for sharing all of that. And can you tell us now about your research trajectory? So what was your dissertation topic? What is your current area of focus? And were there any particular scholars whose work was influential in your line of thinking?

Jessica Lavariega Monforti: Sure, sure. So I did my dissertation on the Cuban exile community in Miami-Dade County. And there was a very particular reason for that. I am Cuban American, but I am from New York. And I kept hearing about these other people who seemed so crazy. And I was like, well, I don't understand how their politics are so different from the politics I grew up with. We're all coming from the same place. We had very similar kinds of stories. How do we get to this place where I'm surrounded by kind of leftist union members and they are voting for Republicans? And it was very interesting to me and I wanted to understand it. And you have to remember at that time, this was like, you know, Elian Gonzalez case was happening, right? Like there were the boat lifts that were happening at that time. So this was very much in the national news in a way that it hasn't been more recently. And so I went down to Miami and it was an experience for sure. One of the really fascinating things that, I will say the research was good and it was fine and it worked out, but the experiences I had in trying to collect the data and have conversations with people told me much more about what was happening there than the actual data did. And I always thought at some point I should write a book about that, right? About what that experience was like. I had, I mean, it was fascinating. I was accused of being a spy for Castro by a member of Congress, right? Like they called my university to like verify that I was a student. I just never imagined that that would occur, that a member of Congress would have to verify that I was actually a student. Every conversation started with, so where's your family from? What's your family's story? How did you get here? Who are you? And that conversation was required for almost every single interview I had with folks. Which was fascinating, right? That it was about

relationships and like do we know the same people? Do we come from the same place? Can I trust you? Was really what they were asking. And how much can I trust you with this story that I'm going to tell you? And my story, what I learned was very different than everybody else's.

Jessica Lavariega Monforti: My family did not come from Cuba at a time of the revolution. And many of theirs did. And I was talking to people who were not just theoretically talking about the Pedro Pan migration, but they were the children that were sent on their own to this country with a piece of paper stuck to their lapels and sent to live with people they didn't know, right? They were deeply personal, deeply emotional, traumatic stories that people shared. And what I was really interested in, I was interested in those personal stories, but the question that I was asking is, if we have a city like Miami where clearly Cubans had kind of made it politically at least, right? If you looked at the number of elected officials that they had, they were far and away better represented than any other Latino group across the country. Did that translate into social uplift for the entire community or only for those folks who were the ones who were getting elected? That was my question. And what I found at that time, and I still think this is true, and I still think this is happening all over the country, is actually there is no uplift. You get a temporary stay of execution from discrimination and oppression, and when you're out, that's gone for you. And there's very little that translates out to the rest of the group. And part of that reason for that is the social distancing that happens, and I think we're seeing this right now in this political moment. We see Latinos by and large voting against their own interests supporting MAGA and supporting Trump, because what they're really saying is, I'm not like those undocumented people. I'm a good American. I did it the right way, and social distancing themselves. So I think it's still a relevant question. Over time, that question evolved into looking at national origin groups and linked fate, questions of identity and political power, and then of course the intersection of those national identities with gender, with immigration status, and the implications for policy. And so that's sort of been the trajectory of my scholarship.

Interviewer: Okay, shifting a little bit now, what does being a political scientist of color mean to you?

Jessica Lavariega Monforti: Ooh. It's interesting. I brought an undergraduate student to this conference with me, and so I actually have had an opportunity to think about that recently as I was talking with her. She is in her junior year, and she's trying to figure out, do I want to be a political scientist, or do I want to do something else? And I think really,

there's a couple of different answers to that. One is, it's important that I'm here. It's important that I'm in this space. It's important that I can model what longevity in the discipline looks like. I also think what it truly means is that we can change the conversation. Maybe that's a little too optimistic. We can ask questions and try to derail some of the static logic that we've heard for the last 50 years on questions of importance. I think that's our responsibility.

Interviewer: And what challenges, if any, have you faced throughout your career, either due to your race, gender, or chosen field of study? I know you touched on a few of these instances.

Jessica Lavariega Monforti: Sure. Oh, yeah, it's all the time, right? That's just, it's just another Tuesday when that occurs. I think, and that's what I think is the most interesting part to me is when I see all the pearl clutching, when I tell stories like that, I'm like, "Oh, you've just never had that happen to you," because this is just what it means to be a woman of color in this field. Or in higher ed, for that matter, right? Not just political science. And so, all kinds of questions. I was told because I studied gender and politics that I study skirt politics. That was always interesting. As a tenure-track faculty member, I was asked to send the facts fax for a senior faculty member because women know how to do that. Yeah, I mean, it's, in some ways, I'm thankful for those overt experiences because the covert ones are a little harder. They make you think you're nuts sometimes, and you have to look at other people and go, "Did you just see what I saw? Are we seeing the same thing?" But I would say that if it didn't matter that I would hear, they wouldn't do it. So, it's also a reminder that I need to stay and that my presence in the space is important.

Interviewer: And so, in your view, what is necessary in order to further diversify the discipline and make it more equitable and welcoming to scholars of color in the profession?

Jessica Lavariega Monforti: I think we still, I mean, we're better than we were when I started, right? I mean, I will say, even just being here at this venue, this conference at the Western, which is always, frankly, a welcoming space. A welcoming space and mentoring space. I wish all of the conferences felt like this, frankly, where undergraduates were welcome and different points of view were welcome, and we debate

hard things and can still be civil, and it's not just all about one-upmanship, which I feel like happens often at a lot of other places. I was encouraged that yesterday, there were a whole host of young scholars who I didn't know, that they're still coming, right? That's good news. But what do we need to do? I think we need to start much younger explaining what it means to be scholars. Can we introduce that to our first-year students, right? And not wait until that junior or senior year because they don't know what they don't know, right? I didn't, I wanted to be a lawyer because that's what I thought a middle-class professional job was, not because I wanted to be a lawyer, right? That's a classic first-gen kind of problem, is that you're not making the choices because you don't know they exist, that those pathways are even possible. So can we be having those conversations with high school students or with first-year students about all the avenues that they possibly could take, right, to get to this point? I also think that we're still seeing a lack of equity, not just in mentorship, but also in sponsorship, especially of scholars of color, right? So that sponsorship of co-authoring, right?

Jessica Lavariega Monforti: I was talking to a colleague yesterday who was an amazing person, and she said, "Oh, well, the very first book I ever got published "was because my dissertation advisor "paid the press \$5,000 to cover the cost "of publishing my book." Well, who was doing that for scholars of color, right? And what scholar of color that's first-gen even knows that that's possibility, right? I certainly didn't, I didn't know until yesterday. I've been doing this for 25 years, right? So I think that those kinds of sponsorship opportunities are still very, very much needed. I will say, I think women of color are kind of kicking butt in the field. As I'm looking at young scholars, I'm seeing a lot of women of color, and I'm actually a little bit concerned that we're not seeing our male co-ethnics kind of come along with us. And that is a huge switch, I will say, from what I would consider sort of the generation before me, the OGs of folks of color in political science. That was very male-dominated. I could count the number of women maybe on one or two hands. And now what I'm seeing is sort of the opposite, where women of color are coming in droves. And so there's still this lack of equity. I will say the women of color are still working twice as hard to get there, right? And so proud of that change, but also a little concerning. Shifting gears one more time here, you've held a number of leadership positions in the profession, including as former president of WPSA.

Interviewer: What, in your view, makes a good leader?

Jessica Lavariega Monforti: I would say, you know, there are two things that I think have helped me and that I've had to learn over time. Number one is I really had to know who I

was. What are my values? What is important to me so that when I was in the world, what is important to me so that when the hard questions come, you're not thinking about what values should drive that decision. So when I was choosing, for example, the topic for the conference, right? When I was chairing the conference, I knew what I wanted to do. I knew what questions were important to me. And then also listening. There are a lot of amazing, smart, determined people in this field. And so knowing what questions to ask, knowing what advice to take, but being open to that kind of collaboration, I think has really been a hallmark for me over the years. And that means you have to have a good network. You have to be willing to be vulnerable in spaces and put yourself out there and say, "Hi, I'm Jessica. Who are you?" And do some of those cold introductions, so to speak. And really listening to folks that have experience.

Interviewer: Can you tell us a little bit about your experience with APSA or WPSA conferences? Any stories to share?

Jessica Lavariega Monforti: Oh, so many. Oh, my gosh. Honestly, the Western Political Science Association Conference is just the best. It really feels like a homecoming when this is the conference. If you're a Latino political scientist studying Latino politics, like this is Mecca, right? This is where you come to do that. But I do have some memories of, as a very young scholar, being able to just make connections with people that changed the course of my career. And even at APSA, I mean, Melissa Michelson, who's been a co-author of mine for, I don't know, 20 years, I actually saw her as a discussant on a panel at APSA. And she was terrifying. Her comments were actually terrifying. And I have said this to her, so she's aware. And I was like, "But you know what? But she wasn't wrong." And I was like, "I want to be around smart people like that," and made a connection with her. There was a conference that was held by Cathy Cohen and Melissa Perry in the late 90s, I want to say, where it was they just brought together a group of women of color in political science. And I met almost my entire network at that conference. They went out and got an NSF grant or something like that, and I believe they held it at somebody's university. And we replicated that. We started in 2013. And we did it every two years for five rounds. And we just called it the Women of Color in Political Science Conference. It's held before APSA. But those ideas were born at conferences like this. And even just times where you're thinking about that next research project, but also thinking, "Here's what happened in my home department that has nothing to do with scholarship." Like, "Am I crazy? Is this what's happening in your program?" It becomes a grounding space for us to be able to go back to our institutions and do the work we need to do.

Interviewer: Thank you for sharing that, by the way. And do you have any advice for junior scholars coming up in the profession?

Jessica Lavariega Monforti: Find your people. Find your people. And what I mean by that is, you know, this is higher ed. Academia is a tough space. It was not meant to be cushy, right? It was meant to be rigorous. And it was not really meant to be supportive of people like us, right? And so there are some cultural gymnastics that we have to do to be successful in the space. And so you have to find your people that you can write with and think with, but also people who will understand the things that you are balancing as a whole person, not just as a scholar, whether that's family responsibilities or parents or whatever it is, so that you can be a whole person. Those are the people that will help you maintain yourself, your humanity, frankly. And so find those people and be unabashed about looking for them. And when it's not working out, also say, "That's not working out." I've seen a lot of people try to hang on to those, and sometimes they end really badly. So, you know, sometimes it's great when you and I are going to write a paper together, and we did some amazing work, and then it's time to move on. And other times, they're your lifelong people, right? So just be willing to roll with it. But finding the people is the key to success.

Interviewer: Is there anything else you'd like to share with us today?

Jessica Lavariega Monforti: I will say I have been at this conference now for a couple of days, and haven't been to a Western in three years because I've been in administration. And I felt like, man, I need a shot of remembering why I'm doing this work. And I have been absolutely inspired by the younger scholars that I am seeing at this conference. I saw some undergraduates on Tuesday, or Wednesday at the pre-conference just, I mean, they're talking about, you know, things that I was not talking about until I was, like, a fifth-year graduate student. I mean, just impressive. Polished, doing amazing work, asking important questions, and doing it in their own way, which is like, "Yes, this is what we've been wanting, right? This is what we've been kind of pushing towards in the discipline." So it's made me more hopeful than when I got here. And so I would just say to those folks, keep doing that. Keep pushing on the conventional wisdom in our field. Keep asking those really hard questions, even if they're uncomfortable. I think that they're asking questions that are going to push not just the methodology, which is important, but the theory and our understanding of what it means to hold some of these identities in this particular moment, which is a new moment for us as a country, for anyone who is still alive in this moment, right? And so I am excited, and I am hopeful about what they'll do.

Interviewer: Thank you very much for your time. I think that concludes our interview, too.

Jessica Lavariega Monforti: Great. Fantastic. Thank you.