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[00:00:28] **Speaker 1** Nearly 1600 people have been charged for their actions at the storming of the nation's capitol on January 6th, 2021, in the largest investigation in US history. All of them could be pardoned by President elect Donald Trump as he prepares to take office in ten days. 11 Wisconsin residents have been convicted on charges ranging from unlawful entry on restricted grounds to assaulting officers while armed with a dangerous weapon. One man serving a three year sentence in federal prison pepper sprayed officers bragging in a Facebook message, quote, You charge that line and start spraying. They start running for cover like you're coming at them with an AK. What lead someone to violently breach the US Capitol. Four years later, President elect Donald Trump speaks of pardoning insurrectionists because he saw January 6th as a day of love. Whether that or a day of shame, what particularly drives his supporters all the way to his reelection. Research into that may surprise you. Here to discuss is UW Madison, professor of sociology, Chad Alan Goldberg. And thanks very much for being here.

[00:01:44] **Speaker 2** Thank you for having me.

[00:01:45] **Speaker 1** So the the kind of running political theory has been that Donald Trump won reelection on the message of fixing inflation and the economy. But but describe what you researched and what it showed.

[00:02:00] **Speaker 2** Yeah. So this is sort of, I would say, the prevailing theme in a lot of the discussion. There's there are reasons for that. So if you look at the exit poll data, the the voters who supported Mr. Trump identified as their top issues, immigration and the economy. But it's always a bit tricky. It's complicated because you have to dig deeper. You want to know whether they're talking about their own personal circumstances, whether it's their general idea about the economy as a whole and so on. So I can tell you about some research that I did with a colleague, my son, who is now a postdoctoral fellow at the University University of Pennsylvania. He earned his Ph.D. here at the University of Wisconsin. We have done some research based on analysis of survey data. And we were interested in trying to understand and trying to test some different theories about support and popularity for Mr. Trump. We tested the idea that this basically reflects a kind of working class revolt against economic conditions or a kind of economic populism. By looking at income and looking at education and looking at interaction effects between the two of them. And our data set, we were very surprised to find that this didn't really hold up very well. We tried to test the effects of these variables in different ways. We tried to look at again at how they interact. We tried various things. We one of the things we did was to restrict our sample at one point to states and the Rust Belt and Great Lakes regions, thinking that maybe it's a regional kind of phenomenon. But in all the various ways that we tried to test this hypothesis in our dataset, we found no support for this. So I think this does call into question this story, this narrative, and maybe encourages us to think a little bit more carefully about how we define these terms like working class. I think very often it becomes a shorthand for anybody without a college degree, but that's lumping together a pretty heterogeneous and diverse set of people, some of whom may have significantly higher incomes. So that's that's a finding that surprised us, but which we think helps to illuminate what's going on.

[00:04:21] **Speaker 1** What is going on, according to your research?

[00:04:23] **Speaker 2** Yeah. What we we tested three theories. So one is this economic populism theory. A second theory is what we call a kind of political alienation theory, which we try to distinguish from the first one. So if the first one is about economic grievances, the second one, the idea here is that people support political outsiders like Mr. Trump because they're alienated from political institutions or from government. They feel like they're not well-represented or that these institutions are not looking out for people like them. And then a third theory that we try to test is a kind of status threat theory. So basically, the idea here is that demographic changes in American society, cultural changes in American society have threatened the status of dominant groups in our society. And that that is what's driving support for Mr. Trump. Now, none of these theories are mutually exclusive. It could be a combination of things, right? So we wanted to test the three of them, see if one of them or some combination of them helped to explain the data that we had. We tested this on the basis of an analysis of survey data. Again, we did not find very much support for the political emanation theory either, which again surprised us. We expected to find more support for the economic populism theory and more support for the political alienation theory. These ideas have been influential. The theory that we found the most support for is the status threat theory. So we looked at indicators of status threat in the survey data. So, for example, people who say who asked the question, do you agree with the statement that cultural racial diversity is important for America? Sort of what they say in response to these kinds of questions, questions about religion, questions about gender. And so looking at those questions as indicators of how people feel about these demographic and cultural changes, what we what we concluded from our study is that the the dataset that we analyzed, the empirical evidence seems to point to the status threat theory as the the theory that holds up best in light of our evidence.

[00:06:32] **Speaker 1** As the driver of support for Donald Trump.

[00:06:36] **Speaker 2** Yes.

[00:06:37] **Speaker 1** So you say in your research paper that this is the first comprehensive attempt to distill the existing theoretical frameworks of the rise of right wing populism and then examine the extent to which they explain it. Why is it important to understand this?

[00:06:53] **Speaker 2** I think it's important because as as as virtually everyone recognizes since 2016, there's been dramatic changes in American politics. And when Mr. Trump won the 2016 election, people could say, well, maybe this is an aberration. Maybe after this, when Mr. Biden was elected in 2020, maybe there's a return to normalcy. But it seems clear, given Mr. Trump's reelection in 2024, that there are fundamental changes afoot in American politics. So as political sociologist, we think it's important to try to understand what are the forces, what are the mechanisms driving this and how they're reshaping American politics.

[00:07:36] **Speaker 1** So the breach on the U.S. Capitol began with the Trump led conspiracy that the 2020 election was stolen. How was that kind of outsized response informed by a threat to people's status?

[00:07:49] **Speaker 2** Yeah, I think one of the key factors here is feelings about immigration. So American immigration law was reformed in 1965. This led over time to significant flows of immigration from new sources into the United States. It took decades for the effects to fully manifest. It was a gradual process. But there are significant there are significant changes going on in terms of the in terms of the proportion of Americans who are foreign born, for example. Some people have compared the current situation to the situation in the United States in the early 1900s when there was also a major upsurge of nativism leading to the national origins quotas legislation in 1921, in 1924, which essentially slammed the doors for immigration for decades. So we think it's connected to this theory of status threat in that way. And I have seen some research indicating that among those who participated in the January 6th insurrection motivations, key motivations included the idea, the belief that the 2020 election was stolen. And also concerns about immigration. So we think that this is something that's that's consistent with the status threat theory.

[00:09:15] **Speaker 1** So the status threat theory, according to your paper, includes features of racism, sexism and xenophobia, as well as cultural and moral traditionalism. Yeah. I mean, to put it bluntly, yeah.

[00:09:31] **Speaker 2** I think it's important to emphasize that the way that we conceived this, it's a combination of several different sorts of status threats. So sometimes people will want to say, Well, Trump, Mr. Trump was elected because of racism in the electorate or among his supporters or because of sexism or because of Islamophobia or Christian nationalism or other kinds of things. We thought it's important to look at these various kinds of status threat together and to see how they might be coming together to reinforce a sense of being under siege among some Americans.

[00:10:09] **Speaker 1** So in your mind, what is wrong with politics and policy if so many Americans feel that their very way of life is threatened?

[00:10:19] **Speaker 2** I think there are two issues here. And the question that you asks are one is about policies. That can that can lift up all Americans, can alleviate status anxieties, but do it in a way that is not going to be detrimental to other Americans who would be adversely affected by certain kinds of changes that you could imagine, for example. But the other issue here is about how those policies and the effects of those policies are communicated. And so, of course, we live now in a world where the media of communication are also increasingly fragmented and polarized by partizanship and by politics. In the early 20th century, there was a well-known American sociologist, Robert Park at the University of Chicago, writing about immigration in those years who said that for democracy to work, it's important that Americans live and think in the same world. And I have the feeling and I think many Americans have the feeling that more and more we don't feel like we live and think in the same world.

[00:11:27] **Speaker 1** All right. Well, thank you very much and thanks for sharing your research. Chair, Alan Goldberg.

[00:11:32] **Speaker 2** Thank you.

[00:11:37] **Speaker 1** Longer.

[00:11:38] **Speaker 2** I thought you were going to ask me more about. About the. The insurrection itself. Yeah. Yeah.

[00:11:46] **Speaker 1** So, I mean, I didn't. Because I kind of felt like you. You answered it in one question, but is there something more that you'd like that you think we should touch on there?

[00:11:58] **Speaker 2** I do. Yeah.

[00:11:59] **Speaker 1** And we can right now. Okay.

[00:12:00] **Speaker 2** Yeah. Great. So, you know what I was going to say about the the reaction, the public reaction to the January 6th insurrection, which I think is interesting, is that from the very beginning, immediately after the events, if you look at the polling data, there was a partizan divide and reactions to it. So when people were asked, for example, whether Mr. Trump was to blame for the insurrection or even more importantly, when they were asked how important is it to find and to prosecute people who participated in the insurrection and broke the law, there was already a gap between Democrats and Republicans in the polling responses. The percentage of Republicans who said, for example, that it was important to find and prosecute those involved was significantly lower than for Democrats over time, that the proportion of Republicans saying that has fallen still more so instead of the gap closing, instead of there beginning to be a kind of convergence or consensus around this. The partizan gap has widened. I think that's connected to something that you touched on in your remarks, opening the segment about the way that Mr. Trump has turned the narrative around the January 6th insurrection on its head, because his his line about this is that Democrats, that Mr. Biden and the Democrats are the real threat to democracy. This is the way that he presents it. So he has repeatedly and incessantly claimed falsely that the 2020 election was stolen. He continues to say this. We saw in the end the election and the vice presidential debates his running mate, J.D. Vance, was unwilling to disavow this idea, was unwilling to distance himself from this idea. So this is one way in which Mr. Trump claims that Mr. Biden and the Democrats, the Democrats, are the major threat to democracy the other way, of course. Mr. Trump, we should keep in mind that he is a convicted felon. We should not forget that he is going to be the first convicted felon sitting in the White House in American history. And how does he respond to this kind of situation? His response is to say that the judicial system, the justice system has been weaponized against him, to say that he's being persecuted. Again, these are false claims. But this is the this is the story that he tells and he extends the story then to the January 6th insurrectionists, because he describes them as hostages. He describes them as political prisoners. So the idea here is that they, too, are victims of a weaponized judicial system. The the important thing to keep in mind here, I think, is that majorities of Republicans and the polling data have increasingly come to adopt this story that Mr. Trump has told incessantly. And so if you look at the exit poll data for the 2024 presidential election, if you look at just those voters who in the exit polls said that they think that American democracy is under threat, you might expect that most of those who said so would be Harris supporters. But, in fact, it's roughly split 5050. So of those voters who say they think American democracy is under threat, roughly half of them supported Mr. Trump. This, I think, is a very troubling and a very dangerous situation that the the reactions to January 6th, the insurrection are so divided along partizan lines. And I think it is instructive to compare this, for example, to the Watergate crisis in the 1970s. So a colleague of mine, a sociologist at Yale, Jeffrey Alexander, did some very interesting work about the Watergate scandal, pointing out that when the break in occurred in 1972, there was no political crisis right away. Many Americans thought this is just politics as usual. There's some minor crime going on here. But it wasn't a crisis. It didn't become a crisis until two years later. By 1974, when Mr. Nixon resigned. Then it was a crisis. And what Jeffrey Alexander shows in his research is that in the two years in between, there's this process where a consensus, a broad social consensus emerges involving significant groups in American society, that this is not just some minor criminal act, but that this is a deviant act. It's symbolically polluting, and it threatens core American values that regulate political authority and the country only then. Could institutional social control mechanisms be brought into play and ritual processes of purification and expiation should be brought into play. None of those conditions are present today around January 6th. We don't have that broad consensus. It doesn't seem like one is developing, and that means that the institutional social control mechanisms are hampered. They can't be as effective without that kind of broad consensus, that feeling among a wide bipartisan group of Americans that core American values were threatened in the January 6th insurrection and continued to be threatened by election denialism.

[00:17:15] **Speaker 1** How does history treat January 6th?

[00:17:20] **Speaker 2** That remains to be seen. I'm always hesitant to make predictions. I think social scientists are not very good at it, but I think we can say that if trends continue the way that they are, and especially if Mr. Trump follows through with his vow to pardon those who were convicted and the January 6th insurrection, this will simply exacerbate and worsen the situation that I've described. It will deepen the Partizan division around this, and it will make it even less likely that January 6th will lead to some kind of national unity and resolve, unfortunately.

[00:17:54] **Speaker 1** All right. Chad, Alan Goldberg, thanks very much.

[00:17:56] **Speaker 2** Thank you.