

Psephology with Dr. Michael Lewis-Beck

Ologies Podcast

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Oh heyyyy, it's that neighborhood lady who wears pantyhose with sandals and hosts a polling place in her garage with a bowl of leftover Halloween candy, Alie Ward!

Welcome to this special episode, it's a mini, and it's a bonus, but it's also the first one I've ever done via telephone. Usually, I drag myself to a town and I make an ologist meet me in a library, or a shady hotel, and we record face to face, but time was of the essence here. He had a landline, raring to chat, we went for it. I did not know this ology was an ology until the day before we did this interview.

Okay, we're gonna get to it. As always, thank you, Patrons for the for fielding my post, "hey, should I record a really quick voting episode this week?" with your resounding yeses. I love you, thank you for supporting the show. OlogiesMerch has shirts and hats if you need 'em. And thank you everyone for leaving reviews and ratings, including San Rey [phonetic] who called this podcast, "Sherlock Holmes dressed in street wear." I will take that. Also, you're assuming that I'm wearing pants...

Quick plug also, I have a brand new show on Netflix that dropped today! It's called *Brainchild*, it's produced by Pharrell Williams and the folks at Atomic Entertainment. I'm in every episode popping up to explain science while also wearing a metallic suit and a beehive. Binge it, fam! I want to make like fifty more seasons. It started today – yay!

So, psephology is a word. I couldn't even pronounce it until I was several minutes deep into this interview. It comes from the Greek word for pebbles, because waaay back in the day, before there were voting machines – that I'm terrified of getting hacked – people voted with pebbles. They're like, [*old timey accent*] "doink, there's my vote." Psephology is a branch of political science and it crunches numbers, analyzes trends and predicts election outcomes, but it's also risky. It's not always correct. These midterms are very important and they're shaping up to maybe have historical turnout.

Everyone's abuzz about what they can do, so I hopped on the phone with this psephologist. He's based at the University of Iowa, in the swing state of Iowa, to chat about who's winning what in the midterms and why, voter turnout in the US versus other countries, what to do when politics has you in a rage, and if he was surprised by the 2016 election, AND what's gonna happen in 2020?

Now, this is a short episode turned around on the fly, I didn't get to ask him everything. But it's inspiring, it'll have you picking out an outfit to wear November 6 for the US midterm elections, so please show up for political scientist, statistician, and psephologist Dr. Michael Lewis-Beck.

[*intro music*]

Alie Ward: Okay, here we go, [*melodically*] giving him a call... [*phone ringing*] Dr. Lewis-Beck? This is Alie, how are you?

Dr. Michael Lewis-Beck: Pretty good.

Aside: So this is my first interview ever done remotely. You know I never do them this way, so the sound is very unique to this episode. If you've never listened to Ologies before, this is not what they usually sound like, but it's worth it. So, I was gonna interview him after the election but in our email exchange he said: "What is unique about forecasting is the predictions are made before the event, so I think we should talk before the election." And I was like, "good point, my friend."

Michael: That's a big thing about... Forecasting, if you think about it, it's all about saying what's going to happen before it happens. It's really a lot easier to explain stuff after it happens. People don't like to do that because you can get egg on your face.

Alie: Right! I wanted to ask you personally, what attracted you to this field and this particular focus on political science?

Michael: You know, this is funny. One of the things that caught my eye when you wrote is this phrase – psephology – is not used in the United States very much by political scientists. It's used more in Britain. For one thing, it's hard to pronounce.

Alie: [*laughs*] I did notice that, I just didn't even bother trying to pronounce it!

Michael: In economics, there's a long tradition of forecasting, forecasting growth especially, how the economy is going to be doing. There's a long, honorable, scientific tradition in economics but in political science there has not been this tradition at all. In fact it's been scorned. So, when I started out I was probably the first person that took this seriously, as not just a guessing game or a Monday morning quarterbacking but saying, "let's make a science out of this, and do some scientific work on this, just like the economists do, and take it seriously."

The first paper I wrote on this, which was around 1980, I submitted it to a scholarly journal and they wouldn't even take it. They said, "this is not political science, this is just fun and games." I was much younger then and that was a real blow because I thought, "oh my gosh I can't get any respectability for this." So that was a voice-in-the-wilderness sort of thing.

Aside: Michael's work doesn't rely on polling potential voters a few days before the election and then extrapolating from there. He often works with another political scientist, Professor Charles Tien, and their predictions are much more complex, they're

done months in advance, and they involve this deep analysis of demographics, economic and market variables, so he's one of the top people in the country doing this.

Alie: And what about you personally, have you been a registered voter at the polls since you were 18? Have you been interested in democracy or politics since you were younger? Or is this something that developed a little bit later in life?

Michael: I've always been interested in politics and I was... Well this is a funny story, when I was 18 I started college and I thought, "I really wanna learn as much about politics as I can." So in addition to taking courses, I joined the Young Republicans, the Young Democrats and the Young Socialists.

Alie: That's fair.

Michael: *[laughs]* I joined all of them! Just because I thought, "well this would be the best way to get the information." And then I realized really quickly that nobody in any of these groups liked this. They said, "what are you doing here?" And so I learned really quickly that politics is about party, and about partisanship, and preferences, and so you sort your preferences out.

Alie: Getting to the midterm elections, what is gonna happen? What is your prediction? This is gonna come out days before voting. What do you think is going to happen in terms of the House, in terms of the Senate, any surprises?

Aside: Y'know, for context I'm just gonna butt in here really quick with some basics before we get to the prediction. So, the anatomy of representation. Never, ever feel bad if you don't remember or understand these things, we learned them once in fourth grade and then... life gets muddy.

So, the US Congress is made up of the House of Representatives – you can call it the Congress or the House – and the Senate. In the House there are 435 members max. Right before these 2018 midterms we've got 235 Republicans, 193 Democrats, 0 Independents and 7 vacancies, because sometimes people just straight-up die or quit. Their terms are two years.

Now the Senate has a hundred members, two from each state despite population, and right now the party breakdown is Republican 51, Democrat 47, Independents 2. Senators serve six-year terms. Right now the Republicans control both the Senate and the House.

See? This is fun, this is like fantasy football! But instead of a dream game it's kind of like a nightmare reality, wherein bills get passed and unqualified people are confirmed into lifelong positions that affect millions of lives.

Okay, so what's going to happen?

Michael: The forecast for the House is that the Republicans are going to lose 44 seats, which means they'll lose the majority, and that's pretty big news. Basically, all the scholars who do the kind of forecasting that I do – that is to say they build a model based on theory and major political and economic indicators - they all see a Republican loss in the House. They don't see the same numbers and they don't use the same variables exactly, but they all point to a Republican loss of the House. So, if that didn't happen that would be a big surprise. I think that is going to happen.

Now the Senate, essentially because of the electoral calendar, only a third of the senators are up every time, so we do show a gain of one seat in the Senate but that's not going to give the Democrats a majority. Most of the modeling work does not show that the Senate will become a Democratic majority.

Alie: And what do you think is driving that change? When you're plugging in all of your statistical models, you're not just polling people. Why do you think that the House will flip?

Michael: Well first off, there's this really long-term, deep force. One of the things that political scientists do is we look at long-term, deeper factors that move the polity one way or another. One thing we know is at midterms the party in the White House always gets clobbered. It has happened but it's quite rare that the party in the White House actually has a net gain of seats. This is as close as it gets to having something be what we call "iron law," this is something that virtually always happens. So, this is a midterm and that's a heavy weight against any president and his or her party.

First of all, in the model there's three things, there's whether or not it's a midterm - which it is - then how the economy's doing is the second thing, then the third thing is how much job approval does the president have, you know the Gallup question about "how's he doing his job?"

Alie: Yeah, how is that going?

Michael: Let's talk about the economy. Some people think the economy is doing well but in fact the measure that's usually used in these models is the growth rate of per capita disposable income, how much has real per capita income grown in the first half of the election year, and it's grown like 1.7%. Now that's growth, but not that much growth.

The cut point that we show across all elections since 1952 – all congressional elections – is if the party in the White House has a growth rate of per capita disposable income of more than 2%, they're most likely going to win. If it's less than 2% they're most likely going to lose.

Income growth, there has been some but it's not been spectacular, contrary to lots of other people who are talking about how great the economy is. If you look at growth rate of the economy over the whole six months of this election year, it's been about average

or actually a little under average in terms of this whole series. He had that one gigantic quarter which he took credit for, but the longer period's not been spectacular. So, these numbers in the economy, no matter how you look at it they're really not gonna help him that much.

Alie: And the market's down. The market just, kind of, took a little bit of a dive.

Michael: Yeah, that's also a factor.

Alie: Does anything social go into that? Like, we've had a very, very violent week in America, will that have any impact?

Michael: People have opinions about that, and their approval of the president will go up or go down depending on their views. Trump has been in the low 40s for a long time, and that is not a happy picture for the Republicans because when the president is running in the low 40s, they lose a lot of votes.

Aside: Now, these are the Gallup presidential approval ratings. When Obama left office his was 59%. Even Nixon made it to the high 50s. Trump's has averaged 39, dipping several times into the low 30s. Just a note to anyone wanting to become president just for a popularity boost: that's not how that works. If you just want more adoration, you're better off having a dance video go viral, or starting a DIY crafting blog. Anyway...

Michael: Trump, in that sense, it's in line with historic record. Republican or Democrat, when a president has a rating like about 40, 42 going into a congressional election it's almost certain that his party will lose the House, lose lots of votes, lots of seats, and that's the case now. The big picture is that he doesn't have the popularity, the job approval he needs, on a whole host of issues beyond the economy to enable his party to expect a victory here.

Alie: Do you ever expose what your personal politics are, or do you try to keep that completely out of the public eye so people don't, maybe, think anything's tainted?

Michael: Well, the problem is, I'm giving talks all over the world and this is something that happens; if I give a talk and I say the socialist is going to win, I think, or the conservative is going to win, or the Republican, you know, then they think that that's my politics and they start down that road, and that's not really... My fellow forecasters, we try to not let our personal politics intrude in the science, and not all the forecasters have the same political points of view. I mean, I happen to know the politics of most of the forecasters, I know whose side they're on. [*joking*] That's very juicy information! But it's just not useful as a scientist to release that kind of information.

Alie: Now, in the 2016 election I know that you had forecasted Clinton with a very, very narrow margin of win, and when you look at the popular vote it seems like that was

accurate. Were you really surprised on that day, and also what are your thoughts on the electoral college? I know I got a lot of questions from listeners about, "Why do we still have this?!"

Michael: Charles and I forecasted that she would get 51 percentage points of the two-party popular vote and she got 51.1, so we were very proud of that. That was on the money and that was three months before. I mean, profound opinions like the party you're going to vote for, these things are mostly inertial, in other words they hardly ever change. There is some change and that change that occurs is important, but most people at the end of the day are back where they started in terms of which party they would vote for.

Alie: And when you were watching the election and watching the electoral votes come in were you surprised, what was your reaction that night?

Michael: I was surprised because... Well this is just such a hornet's nest but... [*Alie laughs*] This is a very interesting scientific finding – if a candidate gets between 50 and 51% of the two-party popular vote, in that tiny little space, the prediction is that they would lose the electoral college majority.

So in a statistical sense I wasn't surprised. But if I'd had to put my money on it I did think she was going to take it, I was surprised that she did lose. Campaign strategists, the problem is they're half smart, and so they can game the electorate, and by doing things – very targeted campaign tricks – they can really turn the electorate around.

Here's one thing, campaign strategists, they've got this idea that there are battleground states, and there are safe states. So, "we won't go to the safe states, we'll put all our money and go to the battleground states." You know, is Michigan safe? Well, no it wasn't safe but people thought it was safe. Was Wisconsin safe, was Pennsylvania safe? A good campaigner goes, essentially, everywhere.

Aside: So who is kicking our ass with voter turnout? I looked it up and it turns out... everybody. Literally, like every country. Australia, props on that 95% voter turnout! Chile, 93%. Italy, 90% voter turnout. America, let's get to those polls! What are we doing?! 48%?!

Now, if getting there is a challenge, I hear you. Some companies are actually offering to help on Election Day. According to an article I saw on Curbed, Lime Scooters is giving away free rides of up to 30 minutes across the company's fleet of bikes, e-bikes, and scooters. Zipcar is giving users \$20 credit for renting a car on election night between 6:00 and 10:00 p.m. after work. There's a National Bike Share service called Motivate that's also offering free trips. Lyft is giving half off on rides to polling places on Election Day, and cities like LA, Dallas, Houston, Tampa and more are offering free public transit with a voter I'd. They're like, "hop on board, for free, let's get you voting."

Now, if you're confused about voting ID needed, that's very common and some might say deliberately confusing. It varies from state to state. Some states don't even require ID at all, like California. Some states you might need a photo ID.

I have a friend, an author named Jade Chang – her novel, *The Wangs vs. The World*, by the way? Truly amazing. I loved it so much, one of my favorite books last year – she texted me this morning letting me know that she's been doing a lot of canvassing in Texas, and a lot of folks in Texas thought they couldn't vote with an expired license. But actually it's law that in Texas and some other states you can use an expired license as a voter ID, as long as it's been expired for under four years. And if you're over 70, there's no limit in terms of how long your ID can be expired for. In Georgia, where Stacey Abrams is running for governor, you can vote with an expired license there as well. So...

Also, seriously, *The Wangs vs. The World* was one of my favorite books. I'm just sayin', Jade Chang – loved your novel. So if you want to help out and help get people to the polls and you have a car, you can check out programs like Drive.Vote where you can volunteer to take people to the polls, or you can look for a ride that way. Lastly, and maybe most importantly, my birthday is November 6. It's Election Day. So I'm begging you, personally, can you vote, please? [*plaintively*] Don't you care about my birthday?

Okay, this next part kind of blew my mind.

Michael: Here's the example, say you're in a local election and your favorite candidate loses by one vote, and you say, "oh why did I not vote today?" you know? "If I'd have gone to vote she would have won. It's my fault." But then everybody could say that, everybody's responsible for that loss or that win.

Alie: That was, kind of, my next question, what can people do to know that their vote counts, and what can people do to make a difference outside of, maybe, the echo chambers of their own community, or social media? What can people who are activated after this last presidential election, who were perhaps disappointed by the outcome – to use an understatement – what can people do, especially coming up looking for 2020, and in the week before the 2016 midterms, what action can people take?

Michael: Well the first thing is, vote. The sad truth is that about half the electorate doesn't vote at the midterm time, and that's a sad commentary. It's a lot, and I'm doing a book now on Denmark, the Danish turnout rate is like 80 or 85%. I mean, they vote, you know? You're not going to have an impact if you don't vote. That's a simple thing to say but it's just so important. Here's another thing, what we know in political science is the majority of the electorate who have a party, they're Democrat.

There's more Democrat identifiers in the electorate - and this has been true since the '50s - than there are Republicans. What happens is, the Democrats are less likely to turn out. So, if everybody voted by their party ID, the Democrats would win almost every time. But they don't, because they stay home disproportionately.

Alie: Why?

Michael: Well, some of them have a hard time, you know, they have health issues or they have money issues, they can't get to the polls, and some of them just... you know, a lot of people just don't vote. I'm not happy with that, I think the system would be healthier if more people voted. The other thing I've observed now, everybody's so angry that they don't talk to anybody who's not like them. That's really not changing hearts and minds there.

I see this all the time, people are just mad at the opposite side. Democrats are mad at the Republicans, Republicans are mad at the Democrats. There is a group of Independents in the United States. The group of true Independents is about 10%. In close races these people matter. So, in addition to voting, try to reach out to someone that's maybe not quite in your comfort zone. Just treat them like a person, have a chitchat.

I'll put it this way, you and I, and probably your listeners are in a political bubble where we follow politics all the time, we talk about it all the time. It's really on our minds and we have strong views, and we think they're coherent views, but the average citizen does not think that way. They've got other things to deal with, they've got to get their kid's teeth fixed, you know, they gotta take out the garbage, all this other stuff, they gotta talk to their in-laws... They gotta live their life.

There's a lot of noise in people's heads. Now that's bad in one sense, but on the other hand it's good because that means that they're not deeply committed to something that they could never possibly think their way out of, you know? Preaching to the choir is not going to get more people to your side, you know? Whatever side you're on, you need to speak to people who may be open to another point of view.

Alie: Do you think Trump is going to win again in 2020?

Michael: Actually, if I were gonna bet on it I would say no. There's some substantial cracks in the Trump support base. I mean, this time twice as many Republican candidates are not running. They're choosing to retire rather than run.

Alie: Ohhhh!

Michael: Now why are they doing that? It could be that they're sick or something, but they could well be saying, "this Trump train is not gonna get to the station." That's a sign that people who are political elites are making decisions about their future.

Aside: Now is a really great time to start getting people ready for 2020. Just imagine if we had double the voter turnout. Like, no offense Australia, but I want to smoke your asses in terms of voter turnout rates. Like, I wanna kangaroo box your impressive stats into second place. America, let's vote more than Australia.

Alie: I have two questions I always ask every guest at the end. What is the worst thing about your job? Anything from the coffee maker in the office to reading the newspaper, what's the thing that stinks the most about your job?

Michael: This is actually funny... So if you don't want the person next to you on the plane to talk to you, say you're a statistician. [*Alie laughs*] Because I can talk stats and then immediately the person next to me will be glazed over, they'll be bored out of their mind, and they won't talk to me.

If I tell them I'm a political scientist, they will talk to me forever, and all they want to do is tell me their point of view.

Alie: [*sympathetically*] Oh dear!

Michael: If I tell them I'm a political scientist... I do have a tendency to speak the truth so I tend to say the truth even if it's going to work against me. I mean, like, I'm going to get a boring conversation or a rant, you know?

Alie: [*amused*] That's a good political spin! The difference between being a statistician or a political scientist, that's just good PR spin.

Michael: Yeah, this is a hazard of the profession. If I want to tell them I'm a political scientist, and I tell them that, and then I realize that's a mistake because it's going to end up in one of these unpleasant conversations, they say, "what do you study?" I say, "elections," and they say, "oh, elections!" And I can see how their mind is working and I say, "I study French elections," which I do, I spend a lot of time... And they don't know anything about French elections so they shut up.

Alie: [*laughing*] That's great! What's the best thing about your job? What do you love the most about psephology?

Michael: Well I just love to do writing and research. I love to figure out stuff. I mean, the world we live in, it looks like it's chaotic but there's patterns in the world that... it's really quite satisfying to discover these patterns and try to make sense out of what just seems like a bunch of noise. That's really exciting for me.

[*clip from Jurassic Park*]

Ellie: I'm still not clear on chaos...

Malcolm: Oh, it simply deals with unpredictability in complex systems.

Alie: Okay, one more question. Do you think people should talk about politics with their in-laws at the Thanksgiving table, or not?

Michael: *[laughs]* I consider myself a scientist, but one of the sources of information I have about politics is my extended family, because they do not think like people in the bubble think. Like, the academic bubble or the media bubble. They don't think the same way. And I'm constantly reminded of this when I have a political argument... I have to say argument rather than just discussion because there's a lot of politics in my family, and a lot of it I don't agree with, some of my relatives are rascals, but some of them I love dearly and they say what I think are terrible things, you know what I mean?

I have this uncle, I love this uncle but sometimes he just will say... and he's such a sweet man. Sometimes he'll say stuff that I think, "oh my god how can you say something like that, you're such a nice person and you're not dumb." Then I think "well, this is a person. Yes, here's a human being I know, who's very good to me, and he's done good things for other people." It's about understanding. How do you understand these people and not get up from the dinner table, you know?

My dad was just like... oh man he was a hard case. In my family I had two brothers and I quit arguing... I would try not to argue with my dad because it would just get me too upset. My other brother just kept his mouth shut, and then my other brother argued with him constantly, full-blown arguments. If you're a political person and you wanna strategize, then that know-nothing uncle, or aunt or whoever that's driving you crazy, maybe you sort of say "I'm gonna just get through to this person," and you know, "change hearts and minds" because that is a worthy goal. Because it makes you use your skills of persuasion and communication, and that's what politics is about.

It's really hard... The science of it, it's very hard to change someone's voting preference. It's extremely hard.

Alie: So it's more about mobilizing the people that do have an opinion, maybe?

Michael: This is actually something... I don't know if someone's written a paper on this. Is it harder to change their partisan preference, or harder to get them to turn out to vote?

Alie: *[laughing]* That's your next paper!

Michael: That'd be interesting. If the listener is a Democrat, on the whole it works to their advantage to go and get out to vote because they have a margin in the electorate, and that's been a stable margin since the '50s.

If I'm wrong, the main thing about being wrong would be if the Republicans take the House, then I would say I'm really wrong, because all the models I've run show that that just doesn't seem like it's going to happen. But I will say right now all of the scientific forecasters, virtually without exception, are saying that the Republicans are going to lose the House. So we'll see.

Alie: We'll see! I mean, you gotta just partner with someone who is a time machine engineer and then... BOOM! Get in a quantum wormhole together, and never be wrong!

Michael: *[laughing]* That sounds good!

So if someone has a fast pass into a wormhole, just let us know. But otherwise, go vote on November 6th, America, and help others vote if you can.

Dr. Michael Lewis-Beck is [MLewisBeck](#) on Twitter, we're on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#) @Ologies. I'm on there as well as [AlieWard](#).

Now, join the [Ologies Facebook group](#), moderated by the wonderful Erin Talbert and Hannah Lipow. You can check out [OlogiesMerch.com](#) which is where you get any Ologies t-shirts, and hats, and beanies, and pins. That's managed by my friends Boni Dutch and Shannon Feltus.

Nick Thorburn wrote and performed the theme music. Special thanks to editor Steven Ray Morris for turning this bonus ep around in a jiffy. He also hosts the *Purrcast* and *See Jurassic Right* podcast and they are both great.

At the end of the show I tell you a secret. Today's secret is that I wear this one perfume sometimes and people are like, "ooh, what is that?" and... it's *Rihanna* perfume that I bought for \$7 at CVS three years ago. It's pretty good man.

Okay, go vote. P.S. go vote, and maybe dress up fancy that day! Like, make a day of it. Take your friends to their polling places, eat a hot dog later. It's America!

Berbye.

[Outro Music]

[song clip: "I say vooooootttte (vote, vote vote, vote). I say vooooootttte (vote, vote vote, vote). I say, if you wanna make a difference in the world, all you gotta do is vooooootttte (vote, vote vote, vote)"]

Transcribed by Kris Noble, that British guy you know who wants to make jokes about American politics, but really can't because of that whole "Brexit" thing.

For comments and enquiries on this or other transcripts, please contact OlogiteEmily@gmail.com