



POLICY ON PURPOSE

Episode 19: Austin Smythe, former policy director who served as policy director to House Speaker Paul Ryan (R-WI)

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ANGELA EVANS: Hello everyone, this is Angela Evans, dean of the LBJ School, and this is another session in our “Policy on Purpose.” And I'm very pleased today to have one of our illustrious and renowned alum with us, Austin Smythe. And I have to tell you a little bit about Austin: He recently served as Speaker Paul Ryan's policy director and he did that for four years and you know that's a hot-seat position in terms of the House of Representatives and all that was going on between 2015 and 2019. He joined Ryan's staff in 2007, so obviously Mr. Ryan saw the talent and brought him up as a policy director. He has served in various roles, including policy director for the House Ways and Means Committee — another very powerful committee in the House of Representatives, and as a staff director of the House Budget Committee.

So you're seeing a pattern here in terms of looking at the budget, its construction, its execution and the role it plays in our — in the policy deliberations of the United States Congress. He's been described as a quote “budget guru” — I don't know if he likes that title or not — on Capitol Hill. And is widely liked and respected — I don't know, we've talked to a lot of people, and when you talk about Austin — I don't know if you know this, Austin — people just really respect you and respect your demeanor, your objectivity, your substance. So, we are so proud to have you here today, both as a leader and an accomplished public servant, but also as one of our alums. So welcome.

AUSTIN SMYTHE: Thank you, it's great to be here.

EVANS: Good. So let's get started. We're going to be here, you're going to be here during a very important time for the LBJ School. We're welcoming admitted students — now, these are students who are admitted, some have said they're coming, some have not yet made their decision. So they're going to have an opportunity to meet one of our alums, so when you think about it, what do you think stands out to you about your time at the LBJ School that you can think about — you can go back to that time, how meaningful that was to you for your career?

SMYTHE: Over my career, I think the most important things for the — the skills I've relied on that I think were really solidified when I was at the LBJ School, was the ability to distill information. That the Congress has to deal with very complicated topics, the budget is a very complicated topic, things are frequently done late in the process, and what staff have to do on the Hill is be able to distill that information and present it in a way that's understandable, that gives clear options, and at times a recommendation to policymakers.

I think also, the school helped me with my writing skills in terms of writing, it also helped me with exposing me to quantitative methods and numbers. The budget is a number in the end and I didn't do a lot of sophisticated modeling over my career, but I've spent a lot of time being the consumer of that information. I think that's been terribly valuable. And the last was working in teams; I think that a lot of work on the Hill either involves working with your colleagues on a staff, or when you have to sit down and work — hash something out, being able to get along with people, figure out — to get their assistance or to find out how to work out solutions with them. So it's kind of a whole package of things that really helped me along the way.

EVANS: Well that's — you know, it's soothing actually in some way to hear that because some of the basic skills that you were talking about are skills that we're still trying to instill in our students. And obviously they're going into a little different political and social environment than you did, but the idea that you're thinking about computational skills and the big thing in which you said, what I'm very happy you said this is the writing skills because many students really have to work very hard on honing skills so that they're saying things very clearly and concisely, because people who are consuming that at the highest levels don't have time, really, to go through a lot of material that's not relevant. And I think students find that difficult, so I think that's a really important thing. And the other thing is knowing data doesn't mean you have to be able to manipulate it, but knowing when you have good data and when you don't have good data, that's also very important, especially for people who are making decisions that affect, you know, millions of people either here in the United States or abroad. So it's soothing to hear that these are the same skill sets that you see as really important, that what we're still trying to do at the school.

SMYTHE: Yes.

EVANS: So, so very good, very good. So I have to ask you this question. So you're working on Capitol Hill and you're working in one of the most influential offices — I mean the speaker of the House, and you're working at a time when there is a lot of discussion, there's a lot of disagreement in terms of approaches to policy, you know, there's a lot of data and information

floating around — some very good, some not so good. How did you balance, in your own head, what were some of the tools you used knowing that you're going to have to go into something and comprise? You're going to have to — you know what your members and the leadership want to do and you know what the others are trying to get at, so how did you think about — first of all, how did you think about the concept of compromise? And then how did you try to practice it?

SMYTHE: I think the one thing was just talking to people, talking to my counterparts. I was fortunate that I had the chance to — we didn't have to rush into something, we started our discussions a long time and that's really important in terms of developing, getting understanding where they're coming from, but the critical thing is to develop trust. If you can talk to somebody, because in developing a compromise, you need to explore various options in terms of what works for both parties. So I think those were probably the two most valuable things, was kind of, learning where they're coming from, learning what kind of makes them tick, and then that trusting relationship where you could have a frank discussion, explore things, but not have it leaked to the press or used against you.

EVANS: Can I interrupt for a second?

SMYTHE: Yes.

EVANS: Because I think that's really an important point, and also — but that takes time, and also the setting. Like you said it before, at the beginning, you have to start establishing this before you actually have a session where you have to go toe-to-toe. So this is building that before you almost really need it in a setting. And so that's one — I think that's an important point, we shouldn't, you know, we shouldn't go over that point.

SMYTHE: The other thing is that that the leader's staff know that — they understand how to get this done, they've been in this situation before. Frequently you deal with somebody who's a hard charger, whether they're coming from the Republican side or the Democratic side, you could have a more difficult time because they've just never have gone through it. You know? And they feel, "I came here to solve this problem this way." So...

EVANS: Yes, a mandate.

SMYTHE: I was fortunate in that we had — that the people sitting across the table from me had done this before and understood that when it came time to actually resolve something, that everyone was going to have to bend a little bit to find something that everyone could agree to.

EVANS: Mm-hmm, well that was lucky, I mean at that stage — I guess when you get to the leadership stage, you've got people who obviously have been professional, have been through this before, but I can see sometimes when you had to work with new staff or new members, like you said, hard charging, had a mandate, come in and sometimes aren't really very well-versed in the governance of the House or the Senate for that matter. You know, they

understand Congress from an outside perspective, rather than an institutional perspective, so giving those relationships, like in anything else, is obviously very important, but how did you reach across the aisle yourself? I mean, what are some of the things you did to have a presence among, in this case we're talking about the Democrats, so how did you — or even some people in the Republican Party who just didn't see eye-to-eye with what you were working on.

SMYTHE: It was more so from out of necessity than — but I — and it's a two-way street. My counterpart in Speaker Pelosi's staff, the policy director for Speaker Pelosi, I think, you know I come in — one day I'm the policy director of the Ways and Means Committee and the next day I am the policy director for the speaker and we are in the middle of — we have to complete the appropriations bill, we've got a highway bill we haven't done, we're in the middle of a mess that we have to... And we just come in, and I shouldn't say this, we just make up, you know?

EVANS: Well you have to do something, you can't be paralyzed, right?

SMYTHE: Yeah, so — and I think he reached out to me and we had a cup of coffee, so it's a two-way street and I was glad because it was a connection, I can sit down with him, we weren't in some, you know, intractable struggle, it was just talking — talking about, you know, what we'd done in the past and so forth. But more so, I probably should have done more of it in terms of reaching out in advance and reaching out to — it was more so out of necessity where I met with them and we — and some of the situations I went through with the 2018 appropriations process, I got to know Sen. Schumer's policy directors, actually two individuals. And then I was very close, I had known Sen. McConnell's — which is a Republican, I had known his policy director for years. And some of the people I've worked with in the past and that makes it easier, you kind of know where they're coming from, but it's something that I think is critical to talk to the counterparts and if you're in a leadership position with divided government where you need to ultimately compromise on some things, it's really important to have those relationships and to have a trusting relationship.

EVANS: Mm-hmm, I think that's one of the most important things we need to help our students understand, is you have to build these and you have to build them across the aisle, and you have to nurture them, you have to cultivate them so that people — whether you'll ever come to an agreement on something, at least people are going to respect the fact, and want you in that room so that you can contribute to that. So having that kind of approach to things is one of the other thing — we always talk about crisis, you know, like crisis management, we're in a crisis, we have to get this done. So there's a downside to that because it's like, "Oh my gosh, we have to get something done and we're really — we can't really study it the way we want to study it." On the other hand, you have to get something done; you can't say, "Well excuse me, we're not going to pass this bill until we have a five-year study on x." So those kinds of environments draw people together and how you exploit — and I mean that in a good way, those kinds of environments where you're brought together in a crisis and then you hold that beyond that crisis to go to the next — you know, the next challenge that you have.

SMYTHE: Yeah.

EVANS: Yeah, so.

SMYTHE: And the other thing is that, they're not just across the aisle; the House Republican Conference is a diverse conference with a lot of different views on things and one of the [things the] speaker really wanted to do when he came in was to try to keep his team, his conference, unified. And he'd made a point of, sort of selectively, he couldn't meet with all 241 of them, although we did meetings with the entire conference, or he did meetings with the entire conference — he would pick out representative folks from different camps, or different views in the conference and meet with them regularly in an informal occasion and I would attend those meetings. And you learn a lot from that and you can find out — and again, the meetings were not to, "We've got to solve this problem" — it was more just a sort of informal discussion: "What do you think about this? Where's your head? What's going on?"

EVANS: "Where's your head? What are you worried about?"

SMYTHE: Exactly. I think those were terribly valuable. And you know, sometimes a member who might be perfectly nice, fine conversation, but they're a hard "no" on the bill, it doesn't always work, but you get a sense — it gives you a sense of what's going on and taking the temperature of different parts because these are not, these conferences are not 100 percent unified. There are people with different views and different things on different issues.

EVANS: Mm-hmm, well at the highest level, too. I mean at the highest-stake level, right? No, I know when you think about, again, building the networks, building people who you can talk to because even if you don't convince people — it's really not about converting people, it's about convincing people. And even if you can't at a certain time, that relationship that gets bonded — even those meetings that may not have the outcome that you want, it's all part of that network building and those relationship buildings and you have to do those. That's what our students and, you know, our successful alums — our students are being trained to do and our successful alums accomplish. So that's an important part of, you know, being at top levels in the middle of a mess and many messes.

You said economics has formed the backbone of your career; how do you make this topic accessible and clear to the average voter who may not have the same understanding of economics and microeconomics and macroeconomics? And this is really more of a generic question — one of the things that's really important for us to do is we have to look at new knowledge, new information, new discoveries, new research, and often those — that information comes from settings that are loaded with jargon. You know, and it's the jargon of the discipline, and we have to sit back and figure out, "How are we going to give that to people who normally are not in that discipline? How do we give them a clear picture?" Talk to us a little bit about how — some of the challenges you've faced with that and then how you try to get around those.

SMYTHE: Well, I think for a member of Congress or a policymaker in general, ultimately the thing they're looking at is the economy. How are their constituents doing? And in that it turns

out the economy probably is an overwhelming factor in terms of the level of employment, the level of wages and things like that, people's ability to buy homes and all of those issues. Interest rates to take out a mortgage, all of those factors are terribly important, the challenge is that — I'm a policy guy, and we'll talk in total Greek to people, we'll talk about percentage of GDP and in terms that people don't understand and when you get with — I'm not an economist by training. And when you start talking to the economists, they'll talk about, you know, total factor productivity and stuff like that, that your average person has no idea.

So the policymakers' challenge and they're always after us, is on the communications side of it is, "How do I explain what we're doing here to a constituent?" So we would frequently try to take the analysis and find way where there's a way for us to translate that into the jobs that would be created, or what it would do to wages, or things like that. But that is a huge challenge to take very, very complicated topics — because ultimately members of Congress want to be able to communicate it to the public either in the form of going on TV or speaking at the House floor or in Committee or being back home talking to their constituents — town hall meetings, exactly and explaining it.

EVANS: Yeah, town hall meetings, yeah exactly. Yeah.

SMYTHE: Now one thing I thought was really interesting that my boss did, he had a bunch of plans that he did budget plans that he did and other things — he would go through and do town halls regularly through his district, before he became speaker, then as speaker things got so polarized and so hard.

EVANS: Yes, he was busy and occupied, yes.

SMYTHE: But he would do that and what was interesting is he would learn from the questions, he would learn in terms of how to talk about things, and also learn about how it was received and his — so he used those sessions to both communicate to his, as he said, his employers back in his district, but also learn how to talk about issues and also to see whether they resonated and whether they were addressing his constituents' concerns.

EVANS: When you think about that skill, because that's a skill, you know — communicating and trying to take complicated information and make it simpler for people to understand without really jeopardizing the integrity of what you're saying, you know. People don't normally come, in any walk of life, with that kind of skill set, so thinking about the training that you had, I mean both here at the LBJ School and beyond, but when I was on the Hill, there's not really a lot of training — it's sort of trial by fire, you know, people come there and if they don't have that skill set, they have to learn it and they have to be very deliberate in how they're trying to get. So I didn't see that as something that was a sustainable kind of, we all should be achieving this, so those who did, do you believe those who did then, in terms of just caucuses or their role, had a higher standing or the go-to people because they were able to communicate this in a way that others understood?

SMYTHE: Yeah, I mean it's even more valuable in sort of the electronic age. There's so many ways, forms of communication and in both parties, from all spectrums are working every possible angle, because they know the value of communications in terms of ultimately motivating voters. So I think that — and there's a tremendous effort in terms of the various platforms to communicate and then meet that challenge of how do you present things that, your words were integrity, to integrity. Now, sometimes that gets a little lost in the process. *[laughs]*

EVANS: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

SMYTHE: But it can come back to bite a politician, too, because if you go out and say — make a promise that you're going to do something — "I'm going to go to Washington DC, I'm going to do x" — you know the voters are going to expect you to actually deliver on that and so that's a real challenge, I think for elected officials, which is to both get voters interested in what they're doing, get them to support what they're doing, and then the challenge of actually delivering it.

EVANS: You know, just as an aside, I never did understand-- and I understand it's the political arena, but I never did understand how somebody could say, "When I go there, I'm going to do this." Because, you know, just by the fact of saying that doesn't really project a reflection of what — an understanding of the body. You know, people don't really understand Congress as a body, as a governing body. And, you know, collaboration and compromise and teamwork, and set up to be very conservative, you know, in the sense of "We're just not going to pass things unless they pass many gauntlets of testing."

I think many people don't understand that, but when you're an elected official, that's even more important because trying to educate folks, you have to sort of — especially if they're in state legislative bodies, you have to kind of break that down and say, "This is not a state legislative body because they're all very different. This is a different acculturation." And — how did you see, did you see members — I'm trying to get at, the members who campaigned on that and also think, "Wow, I'm going to get in there and I'm going to be the one, as a freshman, to get in there and I'm going to do this and it's going to happen and I'm going to get a bill and everybody's going to sign up on this bill." Did you see ways, and maybe you haven't been in those kinds of positions, where those — the lessons that they learned were tough lessons in terms of trying to think about whether they're going to make a difference quickly with their idea only? *[laughs]*

SMYTHE: Yeah, I think that there — I think there are different paths, I think members, when they first come to Congress, they don't really fully understand how it works. Because you can only really learn by living it, by living it and doing it and I think they get a better sense in terms of the challenges of getting things done. The other thing is, is I think some members — I'm oversimplifying it, but there's sort of a route where you can try to get things done and work the process and learn it and do the process, make the compromise and so forth. Or the other path, and I don't think members necessarily choose one or the other, but there's — is to vote no and

to say, "This is outrageous, what the —" And sometimes that's totally understandable, the member of Congress doesn't support that and needs to represent their constituents.

But sometimes that's the easier path, which is to go on TV and say, "I'm going to fight this, this is terrible." And to vote no. And there can be very difficult votes where people vote no for principled reasons, but — so I think that's a real challenge for members in terms of finding — and particularly as you're trying to actually put together legislation. For the House, which is an institution which can pass things with a simple majority. For right now, the Democrats have a simple majority, that's what Republicans had before this last election. I think one of the frustrations a lot of those new members are going to have, they're going to come into power and there they just passed HR1 which deals with campaign finance and so forth. Well, McConnell over in the Senate is saying he's not moving that bill.

EVANS: Right, right, right.

SMYTHE: And they're going to have to kind of, "Well, what do we do next?" And there's not a — and they may not be able to free up that bill. So I think it will be interesting to see how the new members kind of digest that and figure — now they can always go back, the other option is they can go back and campaign in the next election and say, you know —

EVANS: Well that's the issue: Are you working for the next campaign? Or are you working to have some legislation passed that's a policy?

SMYTHE: Both. *[laughs]*

EVANS: Yes, exactly. So how do you — exactly! So I think people don't totally understand that incredible tension of people. But I think you make a really good point about saying no if that's your North, if that's your option, if that's — you fundamentally opt, "I'm going in there to say 'no.'" And not engage in the compromise or the, you know, the toughness of actually coming up with something and it may not be the best thing, but coming up with something. That says something about people who are then elected into those offices, you know, to govern.

SMYTHE: Yeah.

EVANS: Yeah.

SMYTHE: And I don't think anybody fits — there's some who I think are generally in that spot, but there's some members who are just... they may be okay and help you on one issue, but on another issue they'll be clear, "I'm a hard no on that, I am not voting for it."

EVANS: Yeah, it's very interesting and I think from the time I was on the Hill, you know, 45 years of experience, what I saw was a big shift and part of it was just the time investment people could make, and understanding and learning not only the House and the Senate and their governing, but also trying to become experts in an area, we just don't give them that time. You

know? There's just too many demands on members of Congress for so many reasons that, you know, staff has become much more of a critical element in life. And I always, again this is just something from my own perspective, many of the members were judged in terms of their substance and their ability to work with others through their staff, you know? Because staff reflect the member so this speaks very well to Speaker Ryan that you were with him. I'm going to ask you this question, you're going to talk to our students today, so after we finish this podcast, our students will have the benefit of having a session with you. And today it's going to be called "Policymaking in Theory and Practice." You know, which is in the DNA of the LBJ School, it's like a theory, we want to give you the basic understanding and knowledge and the basic discoveries that are going to — but we wanted to also, to be able to translate it into what matters and to practice. What kind of tensions do you have to manage when putting together, when you're looking at theory and you're trying to put it into practice?

SMYTHE: I think everyone wants what's called "regular order." Regular order is the bill is introduced, there's hearings, it gets reported out of the committee, it's passed by the House or Senate, they go to a conference committee and they resolve the differences, it gets sent to the president, it gets signed. That happens, but for a lot of the things that require bipartisan compromises, that doesn't happen.

EVANS: Yes.

SMYTHE: It's done at the last minute; the bills are thrown together out of necessity because it can't get through that process for the vagaries of how the House and Senate operate in the — where the various positions are, what the president's position may be on something. So I think one of the things that is difficult is going through that process when — Speaker Ryan was as much for regular order as anybody, he was determined to bring more regular order, allow more amendments on the floor, but out of necessity there are times where, that you're not going to get something done if you follow that process, you're just going to end up sitting there with either legislation that can never pass the House or will never get through the Senate or never become laws.

So you have to make that trade-off. Now bills become law that go through regular order, the farm bill that was done last year went through the entire process. The national defense authorization act went through that process, so I don't want to say it's for everything, there are bills that do go through that process, but frequently that process breaks down and you have to — when you have to get something accomplished, you have to depart from that. And members are disappointed because they want, they feel they're disenfranchised when that happens and they're disappointed — and rightfully so because it doesn't give them the full participation in the process and things out of necessity are done by leadership and by a smaller group of people.

EVANS: When you're talking about like the regular order, there I can literally see, logically where information and knowledge and discovery and research and expertise is really important. In the formulation stages of those kinds of policies, but the closer you get to actually

coming to some kind of conclusion or some kind of compromise or some kind of, like, we've got to do it, that's almost too late to say, "Well, oh I've got something that I think will help you in this particular — " because at that point, it really becomes decision making that's very very fast and unless you have the expertise to help in attention-driven, or an immediacy driven environment, you're not going to be able to participate at that time, which might be the most critical time that a decision is made. So we're trying to figure out how we do this. How do we intersect, or intersect at a time in the policy making process where expertise is really important and valuable and useful and keep that going even though things get, like you say, you know they can get very difficult, tensions are there, and unpredictable — or new things come in that you didn't think were part of the problem?

SMYTHE: Well, when we reach those stages, it's not like it's a blank slate.

EVANS: Yeah.

SMYTHE: They're usually issues that have been around for a while; I had a team of eight people I worked with me, each of those had a portfolio, they were sort of hardwired into their committees and they knew their committees, that's where the expertise is, is in the committees of jurisdiction. And we would draw on that, but to your point, these things are done, particularly when you're up against a deadline, you've got to — the government's going to shut down if you don't get this bill done, or the government's going to default if we don't get the debt limit done. In those situations, there's a scramble, but it's not like it's a blank slate and we would draw on, all sides would draw on — committee staffs or the experts in their own staff to make sure that those decisions were as informed as possible. And you had a good sense about, in terms of what your degree of flexibility was on those issues, but sometimes you've got to call inaudible at the line, which is terrifying. *[laughs]*

EVANS: Yeah, well, it's like, you know, the feasibilities, well I'm not real sure *[laughs]* but we have to do, yes, yeah.

SMYTHE: But you have a good sense and it's not like it's — like I keep saying, a blank slate and you're just making it up at the end. There's still information and an informed process to get it done, but it's better when it goes through a regular order process, it's a more deliberative process, it has the committees' jurisdiction more directly involved, that is the better way, clearly, to resolve legislation.

EVANS: Mm-hmm, and I think people don't understand this legislation does go through, there's plenty of legislation that goes through that, but we see what we see, the public sees is more of a chaotic, last-minute, you know, dug in kind of thing, and they don't see a lot of expertise at that level. So, I'm glad you're able to talk about that. I have a final question and it's really about Speaker Ryan. You know, so people had this public persona, you know people see people, they don't see them behind the scenes and they don't understand the demands placed on a particular individual in a particular office.

So can you tell us a little bit about, something about Speaker Ryan that we— students might not know about him by just seeing him in the public?

SMYTHE: Well, I'm very fond of Paul Ryan, I worked for him for 11 years, like I admire him and so forth. I think he always had a sense of perspective and a sense of humor —

EVANS: That's what — humor.

SMYTHE: — dealing with issues. I mean, I think if you watch a TV show, it's always all this tension, you know? And everyone's on edge because that's drama. My experience, whether it was — with Paul is we would hit, we'd be at an absolute dead end, we'd be at wits' end in terms of, "What are we going to do next?" And he would recite some movie that he liked in the '80s, he would recite a line that was kind of pertinent and everyone kind of laughed and all of that. And it would take us off track for a little bit, but I also think it would give sort of a breath of relief. So I think he is a — he also in my mind, and I'm a huge fan, so I cannot be objective with respect to Paul Ryan, he also I think is really good at dealing with people. He likes — his nature is to like people, and he wants to treat people fairly and I think that was terribly important in meetings. He rarely — I've rarely seen him lose his temper, he would — and when things are tough, he would, dealing with other members. So he always came across to me as a — he'd walk into the room, no matter how bad it was, and, you know, I'd be there, dour, and I'm an optimistic guy, and Paul always had a smile on his face, a spring in his step. And for when you're tired and you're stressed out and you're worried about how you're going to complete something, that is a very positive force — at least it was for me.

EVANS: Well, you know, it just reflects a sense, not only the sense of humor, but a perspective. You know, sometimes we get involved in things and our perspective really narrows, that we're the most important and this is the most important, and we don't understand, "No, there are other perspectives and this is not the end of the world." And I think that sense of humor is really important because it just takes the burden off — people are freer to think through and be more energetic and creative when you've got that sense of humor. So that's really an important thing, so thank you for sharing that with us.

SMYTHE: Thank you, it's great to be here.

EVANS: Yeah, I'm just so pleased and people can't see people, but I've got a big smile on my face because I can't wait to share you with our students, so thanks again. We really appreciate it, Austin. Thank you.

SMYTHE: Thank you, it's great to be here.

EVANS: And thanks everyone for listening.

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it. To learn more, visit lbj.utexas.edu, and follow us on [Twitter](#) or [Facebook](#) @theIbjschool. Thank you for listening.