



Policy on Purpose

Episode 9: Public Policy in the U.S. Senate —A Chief of Staff’s View

With Maura Keefe, chief of staff for Sen. Jeanne Shaheen (D-N.H.) and
Beth Jafari, chief of staff for Sen. John Cornyn (R-Texas)

(guitar music)

NARRATOR: This is “Policy on Purpose,” a podcast produced by the LBJ School of Public Affairs at The University of Texas at Austin. We take you behind the scenes of policy with the people who help shape it. For more, visit lbj.utexas.edu.

ANGELA EVANS: Welcome, everyone. We're on “Policy on Purpose.” This is our ninth segment, and I'm so pleased today to welcome two really tremendous women, both of whom are serving chiefs of staff in the United States Senate. And I had the really great privilege of traveling with them about 10 years ago, and I just have been following their careers. And I have to tell you that we're extremely fortunate to have both of them working in public service, and working for the United States Senate. So I want to welcome Maura Keefe, who is the chief staff for Sen. Shaheen from New Hampshire. And Beth Jafari, who is chief of staff for Sen. Cornyn here in Texas. So I want to welcome both of you — thank you so much for taking your time and doing this podcast with us.

In the past, what we've tried to do with these podcasts is focus on people who have spent their careers in public service, who stepped into the arena of public service and the purpose of public service, and it's a joy they have worked with it and stayed with it. And since the both of you have been nearly two decades, and some more than two decades, out working in that, what I wanted to do was talk more about that. You know, what keeps you motivated? What keeps you involved? And you've been through a lot, you've been through a lot of different congresses, with a lot of different personalities. So what I want to start with is just this simple question, you know, what keeps you going? Why do you stay in public service? What is your passion about public service? We can start with, Maura, do you want to start?

MAURA KEEFE: Sure. I think I got into public service because my family was involved in public service. So it was something I was exposed to at a very young age. And my dad had the same position I do for a U.S. senator for New Hampshire in the 1960s. Worked on the Great Society, worked on passing the Civil Rights Act, and the Voting Rights Act, and all of these landmark pieces of legislation. And while I didn't make a conscious decision to follow that path, I think that had a lot to do with my eventual following that path. It's just a belief that public service is a noble calling, understanding how it impacts people's lives, real lives. And in my understanding of that after having been a chief of staff in the House of Representatives, and now the U.S. Senate, has even expanded and, you know, Beth and I talk a lot about, you know, constituent service and how gratifying that is. And that's been to me, the flip side of the legislative accomplishments is really sort of the bread and butter of legis— of constituent service, and helping people solve their problems and how much power you have to do that, and how you can really change people's lives. And so, it's an incredible privilege to have this job, and to be able to work for my home state on top of it. We're

both lucky to be working for our home states, and that makes a huge difference.

BETH JAFARI: And that's a good lead-in. I feel like I was attracted to public service very much by accident. But I just enjoyed so much — there's so much information you can never digest it in a day. Every day is different. I worked on policy early on in my career, and I found that to be very motivating. It was health care, it was telecommunications, it was energy. But now at this stage in my career, as a chief of staff, my motivation is Texas. It's home, and I get to think about it every single day, and I love that. My boss, Sen. Cornyn loves his job. He's just — and I don't know where he gets the energy. He's really hard to keep up with. And it takes 70 of us every day to kind of keep up with what he's doing.

But, you know, he gets up every day looking forward to what he's doing and it really does energize the rest of us. I love coming down to the state. We have seven different offices down here and our staff, who represent each part of the state, are just — they love their piece of the job so much, and the staff is very motivating for me. To make sure they have the tools they need to do their job, which is making Cornyn look good every day. But he always says, at the end of the day I'm responsible for these 27 million people. So there's a lot of accountability there and it's just every day is a reminder you're customer service. That's what you're here to do and never forget that.

EVANS: I think in the light of noise around the U.S. Congress, one of the reasons why I'm so glad you're here is there's so many people who are behind the scenes who are substantive, who get it. Who get what you just said about who the customer or the constituent — whether it's a New Hampshire constituency or a Texas constituency, or as they play that role in the national constituency that there are people behind just every day trying to do the right thing. And so, I think that's a big motivator that we've heard. Before we had this podcast, I just want to tell the listeners, we had a session with the students, and it was a very interesting session because the students, at some point, were talking about, well, what are you really looking for when you're hiring somebody or, how does your career trajectory really go? Because they want a formulaic— they sort of want a formulaic way of entering and succeeding in public service, and both of you were very good about talking about. Well, some of this is pretty accidental and some of it is pretty much a zig zag. So, can you talk just a little bit about that, for those that are listening and couldn't be at our session?

KEEFE: Yeah. I mean, well, I think I came through the press side of things, and Beth came through the policy side of things, so we took those different paths. But I really sort of fell into it. Like, I majored in English, I was coming out of school, sort of trying different things. I worked in a market research firm, I didn't know what I wanted to do. But all that time, because it was something I grew up doing — I was volunteering on campaigns and at one point I was volunteering on a campaign and somebody said, "Well, why don't you do this for a living? You're really good at it." And I thought, oh, I can do that? So *(laughs)* I moved to Washington and I actually got a job writing on a magazine called Campaign magazine covering campaigns, and then eventually became a press secretary on the Hill, and then chief of staff on the House side, and eventually got to work for my home state for the first time, which was really exciting. And Beth's path was totally different than mine. *[crosstalk agreeing]*

JAFARI: Also, accidental, but I was a journalism major and it turns out that the writing that you are taught in — it was actually very on point with what, because you need to figure out how to communicate complicated issues very succinctly and very quickly. Which, I had a really hard time about this when I went to law school because the writing is so different and all of a sudden I was having to — like, why do I have to write a 20-page paper? I can say this in four sentences.

But to me it all does come back to communication. Whether maybe you come up through the policy side, maybe you come up through the political side. But the one thing all those things have in common, right, is communication. And back to writing, it's... because if you can't get your point across, you're not helping your boss get their point across, then they're going to be kind of missing left and right.

EVANS: One of the things we talked about in the session, too, was what people don't see. What goes on behind the scenes and how much you all work across the aisles in so many different perspectives? And some of it's for constituent work to help your constituencies, and others are in policies that you all are trying to figure out. The tens of thousands of bills that are introduced and you're working on it, people expect you to work on that. Talk to us a little bit about what you see as some of the most basic tenets of working across the aisle with folks on issues.

KEEFE: Well, I will say behind the scenes there is a lot being done. People focus on the large bills — you mentioned the Civil Rights bill — these are not bills that are —

EVANS: They're once in a generation. *[crosstalk agreement]*

JAFARI: I'm proud to say my boss passed more bills than anybody else in the Senate, and all of those are bipartisan bills. They have to be.

EVANS: Mm-hmm *(affirmative)*.

JAFARI: We go through a process in the Senate; it's called unanimous consent. And behind the scenes every single day, smaller bills — I'm not going to call them unimportant, but are being passed, and you have to have a Republican and a Democrat doing those, because it has to clear all 100 senators. There's a process that — a way that that gets done and it's a lot of work. You have to work through objections from — you know, it could be one office that raises objections, it could be 20 offices raise objections on small bills. And so each and every day our staff is going back and...I mean, we have a bill with Elizabeth Warren. We've had, you name it. He's worked with a lot of different Democrats. But you need to find that partner because they have to be doing the same thing. They have to be clearing it through the Dem side, we clear it through the Republican side. Then you got to work it through the House. But we've been very successful in the last two years and passing a lot of, I think, really good bills. And, you know, two of them I think were courthouse namings. So there's some of that, but in other cases these might be helping clear rape kit backlogs. We do a lot of stuff in the judiciary space, and there is bipartisan support. And we put out releases on these, and there's interest groups who follow it, but by and large you're right. These things don't get talked about, what is happening every day.

KEEFE: I mean, the bottom line is that you can't get anything done unless it's bipartisan.

EVANS: Yes.

KEEFE: A lot of people will say, alright we've got this piece of legislation, we've got Democrat and Republican sponsors. If you want to sign on, if you're a Democrat you got to bring a Republican. We're going to be even. We're going to keep all of our sponsors even. So sometimes we'll go to sign onto a piece of legislation and they'll just be like, "You got to find a Republican, because we're already at four a side and if we're going to add a fifth Democrat then we've got to add a fifth Republican, so you've got to go out and find somebody and you've got to convince them to jump on this bill with you." So all of that goes on behind the scenes, but there's much more in the way. The UC point is a very good one.

There's much more in the way of bipartisanship that happens that people don't see. I wish they did see it more often, but —

EVANS: That's a big question, because when you're thinking about just not our students who want to go into public service questioning this, the general public doesn't understand this. We were talking about this earlier. Their image is an image of something frenetic or something very contentious and members of Congress or senators are walking out of meetings and microphones are thrown in their face and they have

to say something. And we're trying to figure out how we can have the American public, and especially our students, understand that that is just one sliver of what really goes in behind the scenes.

KEEFE: Well, that's why what you're doing is important by having these types of forums, because really, I do this all the time. I do it with our interns — I do it, like, to sort of explain that the press covers conflict and controversy. That's what they do. I said this to your students. They cover plane crashes, not safe landings. But we have safe landings every single day. And the number one thing that our interns who go through our internship program say to me that they're most surprised about is how much we work together. And that always makes me a little bit sad but also, I'm glad they're getting that exposure and I say, "Go tell your friends that. Go tell your parents that. Go tell your family members that." That people do a lot of good work here.

EVANS: Yeah. They just don't see that.

KEEFE: They don't see it every day.

EVANS: They don't see it every day. What they see is the tension or the arguments or people getting upset, and having come from the Congressional Research Service, where we had bird's-eye view of all this, that's how things get done and people are working hard every single day to get those done. So this is something we really need to work harder on — getting that completed and people to understand that.

One of the things I want — I can't not ask this question because you're two very powerful women, and you've been chiefs of staff, and there's I think we've said there are 30 chiefs of staff that are women now, but you've been through —

JAFARI: Somewhere around that.

KEEFE: Roughly.

EVANS: Roughly — 30, 35? And we've been through this, you know, when you started off as women in going into political policy, that was like, "Oh, what's that, and what role do women really play in this?" And now you've reached a really, very top. So talk to us a little bit about what you've seen, and what you're optimistic about in terms of women's trajectory into these positions. And I know some of it is just because of hard work and persistence, and people get to see women who can do very good jobs, but if we think about the future too, in terms of continuing to grow that, without making this a women's issue, you know. Just really thinking about the talent that we have, the raw talent. How do we think about that for the future?

KEEFE: *(to Jafari)* Well, why don't you go.

JAFARI: It starts in every area of the office, right? Who we hire, whether, whatever the position might be. Right? It's not just the chiefs, you're thinking about your staff assistants, you're thinking about —

EVANS: The future.

JAFARI: Yeah, and it's about nurturing the best talent we have — and we were talking about diversity earlier, whether on all different fronts. Sometimes you need to, especially on the Republican side, I think we have challenges in that at times, and we need to be better about reaching out in different ways, and finding people who want to come work for us. But that's more of a party challenge. We have more of that challenge than you all do. And we try to do that by just going to different schools that maybe we wouldn't have normally gone to in the past to try to fill that gap.

EVANS: Well, we are also for that — I mean that is one of the things that we talked about too. The fact that you're the Lyndon Baines Johnson School of Public Affairs, people think, "Oh, well this is the last bastion of liberalism, etc." And we would not do our students any service unless we said, "Look, you're here to understand how to get at the bottom of a problem, and how to ensure that you're talking about that problem." So, part of it for us, too, is recruiting faculty and students with a lot of diversity in terms of their political background.

KEEFE: Yeah, it's a lot about the pipeline, but it's also, you know — it's the same thing with women running for office. Like women have to see women get elected to want to run themselves. Well, women have to see women in the chiefs of staff role to believe they can be it themselves. So it's one of those things that the more women are advanced to the role of chiefs of staff on the Democratic and Republican side, the more staffs who are legislative assistants might think, "Oh, maybe I can have that job one day," instead of leaving the Hill to go work in the think tank or leaving somewhere else. They might stay put and try to work to become a chief of staff, so you have to really have role models and it's on us to sort of mentor women coming up in the ranks, and make sure that the pipeline has that type of talent and they realize that they can have these jobs.

EVANS: Are you optimistic about that? Are you seeing young women?

KEEFE: Yes, I am. I really, really am.

JAFARI: Yeah, I agree with that.

EVANS: That's good. One other thing that I wanted to talk to you about, we haven't talked about in the time we've been together since you've come to Austin, is about where you go for your information. How do you decide that you have a trusted source?

JAFARI: That's a great question. Because I feel like everywhere you turn on, right, with the 24-hour news cycle, we have news on all day in our offices, and sometimes I look — I don't know, we have political commentators on both sides, and we know them. But it's always interesting to me. I'm like, why are these people out there talking about this? And I feel like there was a time where you kind of knew because of so-and-so's background what they were bringing to the table, and now all of the sudden, I feel like it's more about causing a stir or shock value than it is about discussing kind of facts of an issue. And you do have to work harder, and you have to encourage your staff to do the same. Right? To make sure they're not just coming forward with one piece of the puzzle and making them go back to the drawing board. Saying, actually, you know, there's three or four more pieces here.

EVANS: So demanding that when they're briefing you on it or when they're seeking your advice, demanding the fact that they do dig.

JAFARI: Because in our positions we're not the people —

EVANS: Yeah.

JAFARI: That's not, we're trusting —

KEEFE: Yeah.

JAFARI: That information, as you said, we're not typically going right to the sources. So, yeah, it's just, I think, reinforcing at the very junior levels of your staff. You have got to look at this problem from all 360 degrees. It's not necessarily your job to recommend what we're going here.

EVANS: To advocate.

JAFARI: Right.

KEEFE: Right, right.

JAFARI: We just need the information, and that's what, at the end of the day, my boss demands of me and of everybody else.

KEEFE: Yeah, you want to try to find unbiased information, and, you know, our staffs are political beings. They might have their favorite cable channel that they're listening to, and whether it's FOX or MSNBC, but they have to understand those are people with opinions and you may agree with those opinions, but that's not what you're presenting to the U.S. senator. The U.S. senator is not asking you for opinions. The U.S. senator probably has their own opinions, but that they want in this instance are the facts, unbiased facts, so we can sit down, discuss them, and yes, we will make a recommendation at the staff level. You know, if it's a new issue, we'll say like, we've looked at it from all these sides. Here's the upsides. We've talked to — and Jeanne Shaheen will always say, "Who have you talked to in New Hampshire? Have you talked to the stakeholders in New Hampshire?" And so you got to go to the state, and see like how is this going to impact the state. And if you go in as a staffer for the first time and you don't have an answer to that question, it's not going to be good for you. So that's always like, get as much feedback as you can, and if the, you know, if the people who are working on that issue in the state say this is really something that will help us, that's going to be a no-brainer for us. We're going to say yes. We're going to sign on to that.

EVANS: Well, what I thought was beautiful about today, and was totally unintentional, was that the things that you were talking about, the values and principles of nonpartisanship, of going down to the constituent and understanding that constituent's perspective. Of working across the aisle. Working on things that you know are both human cases that give you lots of pleasure as well, as the large ones. Those are things that public policy schools are trying to, not only just introduce our students to, but to help educate them, give them the skills that that's the kind of environment they want to go in, and that they can contribute in. So, it was really, it was something totally unplanned, but it turned out really well today in terms of — I could see the light bulbs kind of going off in their faces about what was really important. And we talk a lot about information, because when I was on the Hill, this was centuries ago, but you had reliable information sources that everybody agreed was reliable, but now the information sources are just vast, you know. You can go anywhere and shop it, so it's much more difficult for the staff as well as you to make sure that everything is covered that way.

KEEFE and JAFARI: Yeah.

EVANS: So that's another big thing we're trying to work on. I think the last thing I'd just like to ask you about is, what do you feel — how do you feel about the United States Senate? You know, when I go out and talk to people, I say the most important branch of government is the legislative branch of government — and you know, people look at me, and sometimes they don't even know what the difference is between all these branches — but what is it about the United States Senate that really turns you on to how important this is for the country? Really helps you get up in the morning and go, yeah, I'm in the right place, and this is really, really where we need to be.

JAFARI: It's, I mean, what everybody sees. We're 51/49 divided Senate right now, and on our side Sen. Cornyn is the whip. And we were, because Sen. McCain was ill for a while, we were, it was actually 50/49. It's very divided, obviously, on paper. It's divided in what people see every day, but this issue of unanimous consent that I talked about — that is such a check on our government, and it doesn't exist in the House of Representatives. They are a majority body. When you run the House, you run the House. There's not a lot

of opportunity for the minority in the House. Senate, it's the absolute opposite, and I think in the last 10 years, we've seen some of that go away. There's this effort — I'd say on both sides — to want to do away with some of these Senate rules, and to make it more of a majority body like we have in the House. I don't think that would be a good thing. At the end of the day, the Senate is supposedly where the cooler heads prevail, and as long as that issue of unanimous consent is part of the Senate, I think that we will have that.

EVANS: So you're basically the mechanism, the governance mechanisms that do this, are there in the Senate, and that's something that you feel still aligns very well with the intention of the role of the Senate.

KEEFE: Yeah, and I would add the important distinction of the six-year term. So with campaigns being so all-consuming and so contentious and so partisan, having one-third of the body, instead of 100 percent of the body, up for re-election helps — because you've got two-thirds of the body that can still work outside of that contentious partisan environment. That allows us to still work across the aisle. When you get — with the House of Representatives, everybody is up, you get six months out from election and, you know, all bets are off. They can't get anything done, really. It's very difficult. So, unless they've got a huge majority, and whatever, but I think the six-year term and the fact that, you know, not everybody is up every two years is helpful to be able to be more thoughtful and, you know, longer-term thinking.

EVANS: And you know, some people have said too that, you know, because a senator is representing the entire state rather than a district, that the more homogeneous the districts become, the more important the Senate becomes in terms of really trying to balance the communities in the states. So that too — that role is even more important now than it was years ago. So another reason why we think it's really important.

Well, I want to thank you so much for taking your time to do this podcast. I know you're on the run, and it's been such a pleasure to have you here. It's been a joy.

JAFARI: Thank you so much. It's great to be here.

EVANS: It's been great. It's been really great, and we've benefited greatly, and thank you so much for your service. We really appreciate that.

KEEFE: Thank you for having us. It was really fun.

EVANS: It was.

KEEFE: Enjoyed it. And great to be here in Austin.

EVANS: Thank you.

KEEFE: Thanks.

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