HOST: Marissa Wasserleben
Guest 1 (LH): Lance Hoover '27 CLAS
Guest 2 (LS): Love Speech '27 CLAS
Guest 3 (LM): Lauren Miltenberger, PhD

Intro Sound: *Crowd talking, cheering.*

HOST: What does it take to tackle some of the biggest challenges in the United States—inflation, immigration, renewable energy or even the rising tide of polarization? It starts with a simple yet powerful idea: dialogue. Today, we're stepping into a Villanova Public Policy class where students and faculty are breaking down barriers, analyzing real-world issues and finding solutions.

You're listening to Research that Resonates, a podcast from Villanova University's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences that takes you inside the labs and classrooms to learn from our distinguished faculty and students. I'm your host, Marissa Wasserleben. In this episode, I chatted with Dr. Lauren Miltenberger and undergraduate students Lance Hoover and Love Speech.

LH: Hi, I'm Lance Hoover. I'm a sophomore Public Service and Administration major.

LS: Hi, I'm Love. I'm a sophomore, and I'm a Public Administration and Philosophy double major with a minor in Japanese.

LM: And I'm Lauren Miltenberger, MPA director and nonprofit coordinator in the Department of Public Administration.

HOST: In Dr. Miltenberger's Public Policy course, students dive into how policies are made and passed—or not passed—by examining models of the policymaking process and challenges like political polarization. They learn to analyze public policies using the PRESS model—an acronym for the following steps:

- **P** is for problem definition, pinpointing the issue
- **R** is for relationships, identifying the stakeholders involved
- **E** is for environmental scan, completing a scan of what is going on in practice at the state, county, local and scholarly level
- **S** is for solutions, looking at ways that Democrats, Republicans and third-parties aim to solve the problem and how effective, equitable, efficient and ethical are these solutions, and
- **S** is for success, evaluating which solution will be the most successful politically and in solving the problem.

Dr. Miltenberger invites organizations to partner with her class, giving the students the opportunity to collaborate with them and apply the PRESS model to real-world issues like immigration, inflation, student loan debt and renewable energy. Last fall, the class partnered with two organizations.

LM: So this year we partnered with the Terry Nance Center for Dialogue and they came in the beginning of the semester and provided us with a session on how to talk to each other about these issues. One of the reasons why I think we are so polarized is because we don't talk to people who disagree with us politically and the Terry Nance Center for Dialogue came in and gave us a review of what does it mean to have a dialogue with somebody and to really listen to them.

HOST: The class also worked with the Peterson Solutions Fund, a nonpartisan organization that engages in a range of initiatives to strengthen the current economic and democratic foundations of the United States. This organization provided the students with a better understanding of the federal deficit and things to consider when crafting solutions for their projects.

LM: They run a fiscal challenge and we're doing preliminary work on the fiscal aspects in terms of the way that these problems contribute to the national debt and how that needs to be a consideration and how you solve the problem.

HOST: Throughout the semester, the students work in groups to tackle some of the nation's most pressing issues. These projects aren't just theoretical exercises; they require students to confront real-world complexities, from impacts on the national debt to ethical and practical considerations. Students use the tools they learned about civic dialogue to overcome political polarization within their own groups, navigating differences in perspective, working together to find common ground, and developing actionable, bipartisan solutions.

LS: I'm working in the immigration group. The way we've overcome this kind of polarization is all agreeing that number one, we have a problem. Number two, realizing we need something to fix it now. And what we've done in that way is put our own political views to the side and find out what are the facts? What does each side see is going on? What does each side want to do? And which ones will work, which ones are ethical, and long term will benefit America?

HOST: At the heart of this course is the commitment to respecting and listening to one another—rooted in Villanova's Augustinian values of Veritas, Unitas and Caritas (truth, unity and love). Students set aside differences, listen openly and value each other's contributions. It's this spirit of community building that's essential for addressing large-scale problems.

LM: I think that the ability for us to kind of move forward is, what Love said, you look at somebody and you see them as a person and like, yeah, you might vote for somebody and that person who you're voting for, I vehemently disagree with, but I'm not going to assume that you agree with everything

that that person represents. I'm going to listen and we're going to focus on this problem that's in front of us. And this is hard work. It's not easy to do that.

LS: I'm in the immigration group dealing with the border, specifically, not immigration as a whole. And so, using the framework, we've assessed that the problem is very complex in the sense that there's a desire for a safer country and having open borders may not allow that. And then there's also a desire for, what America is so known for, which is immigration and how immigrants build the country. Relationship-wise, we found that both sides, specifically Democrat and Republican, they agree a lot on policies and there has been a bipartisan bill that was introduced but was shut down recently. And so, there's things being done to work towards a solution, it's just really getting it passed that is incredibly difficult. That's hard for us as well because we have to create our own solution, and we're wondering if it were to be perfect in the sense that both sides are appeased to a certain degree, would it be even able to be passed?

HOST: Lance's group focused on renewable energy—specifically, market-based approaches that offer more flexibility than strict regulations. From initiatives like the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative to Pennsylvania's potential PACER program, Lance's team explored how bipartisan concerns, like electrical grid security, could pave the way for progress.

LH: One of our solutions is the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, which is an initiative with 10 states in the U.S. Northeast focusing on a cap, cap and train and cap and invest program for reducing fossil fuel emissions for power plants. We've noticed that even in Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania actually recently pulled out and there was talks of a Pennsylvania specific program called PACER, which has not moved on but if Pennsylvania hadn't been involved in this RGGI program in the Northeast, they would be forced to be in this broader framework, and people want to be decentralized, so there are definitely some cons.

        I think, easy to be in a mindset of like, only federal is the solution. But we clearly see, I think, in all of our projects that there are lots of state and local solutions, yeah.

HOST: Each group in the class faced unique challenges as they worked toward crafting bipartisan solutions, making difficult trade-offs and using creative thinking. Love's group wrestled with the layered and costly realities of potential policies, while also uncovering surprising common ground between political parties.

LS: A lot of people want an immediate all fix. And it's very hard to try and do an incremental change at a time because it's such a seemingly dire issue. A lot of people are affected. In the immediate form, it's going to be incredibly expensive. For example, if you were to say, let's hire more people looking at asylum registration, so that way the process can go faster. Or if you were to say, hey, let's hire more border patrol, either way you're hiring more people. And if you were to have both, it would be, again, even more expensive. It often feels like you have to do all or nothing. And it doesn't

necessarily have to be all or nothing immediately. What surprised me was how similar both sides' views on the issue was. And policies kind of reflect that, especially in that bipartisan bill. But it's so odd to see how hard it is for them to make substantial progress in fixing this issue.

HOST: Dr. Miltenberger explains that the extreme political differences prevalent in society are deeply connected to the challenges of civic dialogue. In a two-party system, polarization complicates conversations by turning policy debates into values-based disagreements, where fundamental perceptions of right and wrong collide.

LM: So I think, the polarization is getting in the way of the process of being able to talk. And, you know, in a democracy, we need to be able to talk. That's the whole point. The fact that we are so polarized, it is impacting both the way that public policies are passed, or not passed, and then it's like a two-way street of the issue of being able to have a dialogue. We're not able to because we can't get down to the policy debate because we're having a values debate. And that's hard to get down to a more specific policy issue when you disagree very much ideologically values based, you know, with what the other side represents.

HOST: Despite the challenges, Love and Lance found the group projects to be rewarding. Diving into research uncovered lesser-known policies—often operating successfully at state or local levels—and shed light on how solutions can be effective across political divides. The experience not only sharpened their research and policy analysis skills but also broadened their understanding of complex issues, leaving them more informed and confident in crafting thoughtful, long-term solutions.

LM: Once they get to the solution stage, I required them to analyze for each of the problems what's Trump's solution and analyze it as a policy analyst would. How effective is it? How equitable is it? How efficient is it and how ethical it is. Same on the Harris side. And we know which side won the political debate, the election's over, Trump won. And their task is, to be able to look at the policy issues and really have a conversation about what works to actually solve the problem. Our students here, Lance and Love, and the students in the class, they embraced the model, they figured out how to talk, and they worked through this and no matter who you voted for and even when it could have been hard for you to listen to somebody else who voted for somebody that you disagree with, you still did it. And that to me is what is important to remember.

HOST: Lance and Love also reflect on how they now see public policy as a powerful tool for civic engagement.

LS: It's what brings democracy together. It's something you kind of have to be willing to listen and talk about in a non-polarized way that really forces that civic engagement. Because if you can't have the conversation in the first place, you can't have the policy.

LH: Being able to see what your legislators are actually putting out. Seeing if that aligned with what you intended to vote for them for, that can also help you gain some real ownership of knowing who you're voting for instead of the narrative that they might be trying to project on either side. I think it allows you to critically understand where the country is going as well instead of just hearing it through the media.

HOST: Listening to understand, not just respond, became a key takeaway for the students. The conversations they've had and the relationships they've built throughout this process underscore the importance of civic dialogue in preserving democracy. In partnership with the Terry Nance Center for Dialogue, the students learned to listen objectively, respect differing opinions and find common ground—understanding that public discourse is not just a right, but a responsibility to ensure our voices are heard.

LM: Many of us have people in our own families who we disagree with politically. And how do you deal with that? You know, it's, do you not love them anymore? No, right? You still love them. And I think it's being able to separate the disagreement of the person on the political level, the politician. But that doesn't mean that the person who voted for that person believes everything that is said. The other side is then if you're feeling like you also have the right to speak out to people that you are close with, whether in a classroom or on campus or in your family or your friend group, and be able to say, you have every right to vote for whoever you want, but I also have the right to call that out when I see the hate. And that's really hard to do.

         Like Lance and Love both said, if we can't talk about the issues, then someone else will figure out a way to take that right away from us and make the decisions for us. So by us not exercising our civic duty to talk and the responsibility we have and the role we have as citizens to be able to debate and discuss, someone could come in and take that away from us, and that's problematic.

LS: Remember that at the end of the day citizens have the power and citizens have to have the discussion first. So, learning to trust your neighbor is a good person and is a human being at the end of the day and talking with them and knowing that you are neighbors and how can you coexist compatibly and efficiently so that both of you at the end of the day are safe, healthy, and you know, get your American rights, life, liberty and happiness.

HOST: Thanks for listening to Research that Resonates. If you haven't already, be sure to check out our other miniseries, including our most recent one on language and literature. Research that Resonates is available on Apple Podcasts and Spotify.