

NUPI/ Nils Klim podcast 2018: Francesca R. Jensenius

EWR: Welcome to this special edition of the NUPI podcast. My name is Elana Wilson Rowe, and I am joined by the 2018 Nils Klim Laureate, Francesca Refsum Jensenius.

Dr. Jensenius is a Senior Research Fellow at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, and she will receive this year's Nils Klim Prize for her outstanding research on elections, development patterns, and the empowerment of minority groups and women in India and elsewhere.

Francesca, welcome to the podcast, and congratulations on being selected for the Nils Klim Prize!

FRJ: Thank you so much.

EWR: As a Nils Klim Laureate, you are one of so far 15 young Nordic researchers since 2004 who have been recognized in this way for outstanding research in the humanities, social sciences, law or theology – and all of this happened before reaching the age of 35. Today I hope we can hear a bit about your research and explore some of the paths that have led you to where you are today.

So first, the million-kroner question: How would you summarize your research in just a few sentences?

FRJ: So, I am a political scientist. I work in comparative politics and comparative political economy. I would say my main research interest is in how electoral dynamics and institutional design of state institutions affect different kinds of inequality in society. So, for example, what happens to the distribution of resources when you change who is in power? What happens social norms and relations when the state comes in and tries to mandate change? And how can we best design electoral systems and other institutions so that we end up with both inclusive and well-functioning politics?

EWR: And a lot of your work has been about these, sort of, mandated changes in society including quota policies. For example: Last year you published a book called *Social Justice through Inclusion: The Consequences of Electoral Quotas in India*, with Oxford University Press. Can you tell us a bit more about that book and how you got interested in this topic?

FRJ: So, that book is about the long-term consequences of electoral quotas, or political quotas, for the so-called Scheduled Castes in India. Scheduled Castes are the group that used to be called *untouchables* in India, so the lowest ranked group in the Indian castes system. India has had these extensive electoral quotas for this group since independence, so since about 1950. And the way these quotas work is that there are reserved positions all across the country in proportion to how many SCs there are in the area.

I got interested in this topic when I studied at Delhi University, as an exchange student. I studied Hindi there, but I ended up going to a lot of political events because I found it fascinating. One of the things I found really surprising at the time were all these massive protests among students against quotas. And I guess, coming from Norway and maybe being naively positive I thought that quotas are good thing--they are about including excluded groups into both politics and other positions--while I encountered massive protests with students being very upset about quota politics in the educational sector.

And so I started reading up on it and got more and more interested in the different kinds of quota politics that India had had, and the effects of them. This book then became my dissertation project, my PhD project. And I have been working on it for a long time and developed it further. My main focus has been on trying to see—using a lot of different types of data sources and information—to try to see what has happened after more than 50 years of electoral quotas.

EWR: So who was right? Was it the 19 year old Norwegian student, who felt that quotas are a good thing, or the students in Delhi protesting against the quota system?

FRJ: Oh, that is the question I usually get about this book, and it is a hard question. And it is a hard question, because, what I have come to realize about quota systems is that there is no easy answer. This is a political question, it is a normative question: “What do you think is good and bad?” What I really emphasized in this book was to try to exactly disentangle those political-normative questions from the empirical questions. Because, what often happens in the study of quotas is that what we want to see really shapes how we study them and the conclusions we draw. And so what I try to do is to take a step back and say: Well, what are all the positive consequences you *could* expect from a quota system? And then my book has different chapters looking at different types of outcomes trying to say, well this happened, this did not happen, this happened, this did not happen—trying to understand why we see this collection of consequences and not others. And then based on that I can tell you that there are trade-offs. If you put in place a quota policy, you will see changes in political choices that are made, in who has political power, and then that becomes your political question: “Who would you like to have political power, and how would you like resources to be distributed?”

So there is therefore no straight-forward answer to that question. Although, I must say, to not give the boring academic answer, I think I have come down on the side of being weakly positive to the quota system in India, because I think it helps to reduce very long-standing inequalities in society. And I consider that a very good thing.

EWR: I think what is fascinating about your body of research is that, in trying to examine these question of quotas as an empirical question, you basically left no stone unturned in terms of methods. You looked from every different direction. And in 2016, you won another prize for an article coming out of the same project as the book. And I know that at the time, one of the aspects that were especially celebrated was the data work – the methodological work of the project. Could you tell us a bit about that?

FRJ: Yes, so, as my story suggests, I came to this project very much from a qualitative angle, from living in India, from hearing people’s stories about it, and the first things I wrote about the quota systems were based on archival work and looking at what people would have called, I guess, the intended consequences of the quota system. Because, very often when we ask about quotas, people say: “Well, have they done what they intended to do?” And so, I wanted to get a better grasp of what the actually were intended to do, so I went back to historical sources, looking at how the quota policies were discussed in the early 20th century, before they were put in place. And what became very clear to me was that there was no one intended consequence. There were different actors with very different visions and hopes of what these policies would do. And hearing these different perspectives and also doing interviews and hearing people having very different takes on the quota system, I started to miss getting a bigger picture, a larger-N picture, of the patterns over time. And

therefore I started, as part of my PhD work originally, to gather large amounts of different types of quantitative data, to try to look more, with quantitative material, on long-term effects of the quotas.

And I think this is quite typical for a lot of my work, that I often combine a lot of qualitative inquiries in archives and interviews with these large data sets. And I find that it helps me feel more confident about the conclusions I reach. I feel that the qualitative work informs the quantitative work and vice-versa.

Another thing that I spent a lot of time figuring out for this project was how to be able to draw some sort of causal conclusions. This is a challenge we very often have in the social sciences, that when we look at the world today, when we look at what we call observational data, it is very hard to know whether that policy would have looked different if that policy had not been in place: What is the correct contrafactual to look at here? So what I did, and I think what you are referring to, which was pointed out for the other prize I received for this project, was that I tried to use aspects of the quota system to get at causal effects. And I did that by comparing very, very similar places that *got* a quota policy, and did *not* get a quota policy in the 1970s, and then traced them over time for more than 30 years.

And so I was really trying to go back to the design of the policy, which allowed me to compare very similar places, and by comparing very similar places over a long period of time, I have at least more confidence that the changes that I see over time is due to the quota policies and not other confounding factors.

EWR: Very interesting, and I think that takes us easily to this next question: What are your most important conclusions? By comparing these similar systems, one with quota systems and one without, what did you find out about the impact of quotas?

FRJ: So, I think one of the very strong expectations in India was that these quota policies would result in what I refer to as “group representation”, that is the minority politicians coming into power particularly working for their group’s interests. And there is an expectation that we should therefore see more development for that group in areas with quotas. But we do not see that at all. And it is actually very logical that you do not see that at all. The way these quota policies are designed, minority politicians are elected in areas where there are primarily non-minority voters. So they have every electoral incentive to work in similar ways as other politicians. They are also completely integrated into mainstream political parties, and so putting them into power does not actually change policy or resource distribution very much. What you do see massive changes of, though, is the influence of these communities in decision-making in terms of presence in politics, presence in cabinets where they do not have reserved seats. You see a big change in stereotypes about who should hold positions of power. You see members of this minority community gradually gaining knowhow of the political game, gaining confidence. So basically you see that the quota policy breaks a lot of social boundaries, but does not create group representation in terms of them having a very different political agenda than others.

And this I think is quite typical for the inclusion of people with certain attributes. I think it is easy to want to see people with certain attributes, particularly if they are traditionally marginalized, you kind of want them to behave very differently in politics than others. But in reality, when you speak to the politicians themselves, they often do not want to be perceived as group representatives, they often want to be allowed to work on whatever they are interested in politically. And so, one perspective

here, that I try to present in the book, is that policies that include a group are really important because they prevent a systematic exclusion of people with certain characteristics. But once they are in power, you really should not expect them to behave that differently from other politicians.

EWR: That is an interesting finding. Do you think that is generalizable to other political contexts?

FRJ: I do think it is generalizable, although of course every context is a bit different. In the book, one of the main arguments I develop is that I try to distinguish between these quota policies and other policies that are designed, really, to incentivise group representation. So that would be if you *are* elected, for example, as a woman with a very clear mandate to represent women's interests, whatever that is, you will feel that you should do that, and you will do that politically. And so there are examples of policies where that kind of incentive structure is very clear. But then the majority of quota policies, like quotas into political parties, the quotas I study in India etc., are mostly about politicians entering because of some attribute, but once they are in power they face the same type of electoral incentive structures as other politicians. And so, I think we should expect fairly different outcomes from those two types of quota policies. If you have a quota policy that incentivises group representation, you will see that politician actively standing up and trying to voice a certain agenda for a specific group. If you have a quota policy that incentivises "*group integration*", you will see politicians gradually being integrated and you will see long-term reduction of discrimination and stereotypes about who should hold political power. So although in each context this will play out a little bit differently, I do think that this overall idea of how quota policies can be designed in different ways and therefore will have different types of consequences, applies to pretty much most contexts in the world.

EWR: It is a very important distinction. The field, as you say, has been marked by a mixture of political, normative and empirical claims. But in addition to all this work on quota policies, you have a number of other articles about political parties, elections and development in India, more generally. Can you tell us a bit about this broader backdrop to your research?

FRJ: Yes, sure, a very long-standing interest of mine has been to better understand how both electoral outcomes and party politics, the organizational structures of political parties for example, shape political patterns in India. I have several different studies, but to give you an example, I am doing work with a collaborator, Pavithra Suryanarayan at SAIS in DC, where we are working on looking at rerunning patterns of politicians in India. And we think this is important because stable linkages between parties and candidates is something we tend to take for granted in theorizing about politics. But if you look at both India and actually many countries in the world, candidates often tend to rerun for other parties. So there is a lot of swapping around between the linkages between parties and candidates. And that creates a very confusing electoral environment.

In one paper, for example, we are thinking about this issue of economic voting. In the Western world we often take it for granted that if the economy is doing well, people tend to vote more for the incumbent, and so it is seen as a very logical thing that you see economic voting. In India we have not seen much evidence of economic voting. And then I think it easy to jump to the conclusion that Indian voters are not rational, or they vote primarily on ethnicity or other stuff. But what we show is that in circumstances where the same candidate and party run together, you do see clear evidence of economic voting. And so we are arguing that stable linkages between parties and candidates are one of those underlying assumptions that is necessary for voters in order to be able to reward or punish parties, and I think this is a great example of how studying a country like India can help us become

much more aware of underlying assumptions in models of party politics and electoral dynamics also in the Western world.

EWR: It is a fascinating use of the Indian studies to push back against assumptions about political science theories that are often described as universal but may be much more based in a Western or European experience. Now in your current research project you are also doing a lot of comparisons and asking big questions. The name of this project is *Legal Regimes and Women's Economic Agency*. Can you tell us a bit about the main goals there?

FRJ: Yes, so this is another research project I have, maybe the biggest ongoing research project I have. It is a collaboration with Mala Htun, Professor of Political Science at the University of New Mexico. And what we are doing here is really to try to use our experience from different contexts, so, me, a lot from India--she is a Latin America expert-- to think about comparing how different states use rules, regulations, laws to try to change gender norms and gender stereotypes in different contexts. And so, that project is about trying to lift a lot of the micro-level knowledge we have from different contexts and draw bigger comparative lines about state approaches to gender and equality. And we have, again, a number of papers in this project, but I think it might be interesting to mention one we are working on in Mexico. In Mexico, for example, they had this massive legal change in 2007, that tried to go after lots of types of violence against women. Violence against women is important both for women's economic agency and political participation, because it really affects the work environment that women are in and whether women even feel comfortable going into the public arena. And so, we are interested in the consequences of this law. And again, I guess it is typical for my work, I am interested in thinking about what we should really expect to see, and what we do see as a consequence of the law. In this example we do not see very big changes in the short run on the number of women who report violence. But when we go and probe attitudes towards violence, for example knowledge of what violence *is*, then we see massive shifts. And we think this is really important, because it is easy if you are too focused on just the numbers of women who experience violence, to think that "this law did nothing, it is a weak institution," but we think it is a pretty big deal that in just a few years you see completely differently expressed attitudes to what violence is— is violence ok, is violence something that should be reported on or not? And we hope that those gradual changes in social norms in the longer run are likely to shape the more "hard" outcomes that you would like to see, such as higher degree of reporting, or fewer women saying they experience violence at all.

EWR: That is fascinating, the multiple ways of looking to understand social change and if rules and policies have the consequences one may hope for. Now, it is still early days in your big project on women's economic agency, but thinking back on that project and on everything else you have accomplished in the last 10-15 years, what are you particularly happy about or proud of.

FRJ: Oh, wow, that is a difficult question. I am particularly proud, actually, of some of the very large data sets I have developed. Both because I have had long-term funding and a lot of freedom to work on what I wanted to work on, I have really been able to invest in collecting pretty large data bases that I have then been able to share with others, and so I guess I am particularly proud of the full data base on Indian elections that I now, in collaboration with Ashoka University, have put online. It has both an interface to visualize the data and to download it etc., and so it is a pretty massive resource that we can already see a lot of people using. So, I am really happy to have been able to contribute important raw data that are now going into a lot of research. It means that we over the next few years will get to know a lot more about politics in India.

EWR: So, Francesca, looking at your CV, it is one of travel. You got your PhD from Berkeley, you did your MA at Duke in the United States, and you have your Bachelors from the University of Oslo. What brought you to these places, and maybe even more importantly, why political science, and why India?

FRJ: Well, the why India—it was a bit by chance. I applied and got into the United World Colleges when I was 16. That is a school system that is international, you do an international Baccalaureate, the IB, in a different country, and I was sent to the school in India. And so I lived there for two years, from I was 16 to 18, and had a great time with students from all over and ended up travelling a lot in India. So, I think that experience both got me interested in the social sciences, because there are so many interesting things to study in the Indian context, and in particular it got me really interested in India and when I got back to Norway, I ended up starting to study Hindi-Urdu and political science at the university. And that naturally merged into Indian politics, which is what I have been focusing on ever since.

EWR: Now, you have a lot of interesting projects, you have your book, recently out with the Oxford University Press, a lot of strong academic journal articles, is there a recipe for this success or advice you would on how to stay the course?

FRJ: Well, the first thing I would say is to really focus on stuff one is interested in. I see a lot of students thinking that they should be strategic in what they choose, but I find that I can only complete an academic project if I am really passionate about the topic. So I think that would be a key advice, to really follow one's passion as much as possible. Another thing that I think has been really important for me is to be fortunate enough to have really long-term funding, which allowed me to invest in big data collections, thinking about big questions. If you are constrained by short term funding on different topics, I do not think it is possible to really invest so much in these long-term projects. That, I think, can end up being much more influential and important both in terms of academic impact and in terms of societal relevance. And then, I have been extremely lucky in having a very flexible and supportive employer at NUPI. They have allowed me to stay in touch with the international networks that I have worked closely with, to go on several really interesting research trips abroad, and really have focused on letting me develop in the direction that I want to develop in. And so, I can only say that I am extremely grateful to NUPI for having given me that support and flexible structure that has allowed me to really thrive in the work that I do.

EWR: Now, if we have to think about what the challenges are that you and other young researchers face. What are some of the challenges left to be worked on here?

FRJ: Oh, wow. There are some challenges. There is a lot of focus now on young researchers doing great work, there is a lot of grant opportunities, there is a lot of focus on it, but there is still a reality that many young researches have temporary contracts, and end up having to think very short-term in what they do. Similarly, people often have short-term funding, which means they cannot invest in these long-term ideas. And I think, really, if one wants great research—great research takes time, and it is important to invest in letting people work on projects for a long time plus having continuity in what they work on, instead of jumping from topic to topic. I also think that, although internationalization and mobility is great, and give people wonderful experiences and allow them to do better work, it can be really hard for people's personal lives. And I have seen lots of examples of people going abroad on long trips and therefore having their families suffer for it, because their

family cannot come with them, for example. What you do when combining a personal life with your international research career is becoming more of a challenge now that we have more women entering high-level academic positions, because it is no longer evident that it is the wife that is going to leave everything and follow the husband to the field, or to another job, or internationally. This is not only a challenge in research, it is also in diplomacy and a lot of the NGO world, etc., but I really do not think we have found good solutions yet to have to have two well-functioning careers with a lot of mobility and making people's personal life work. And that is something where a lot of more thinking is needed, to find a good balance.

EWR: There are indeed those challenges with mobility and internationalization. In your research, however, you still manage to still manage to spend a time in interesting places, in India, the UK, the US, Colombia. So if you look beyond your research findings, what are some of the most interesting things you have learned about cultural differences, political systems or simply human interaction and communication across various kinds of distance.

FRJ: Well I think the first one that comes to mind, is that there are many ways of doing things. I think it is easy to think that the way we are doing things is the best, but I think there are many ways of being happy in the world. Another thing is probably that although the world is becoming really globalised, there are still some really important differences. And it has particularly become clear to me that we often speak past each other. For example, having different understandings of what a word means. The example I gave previously in how we find changes in attitudes towards violence in Mexico in our work on Mexico—one of the things we are seeing is that people start identifying new types of actions as violence. And I think that is something we are also seeing in the #metoo campaign, that all the attention around sexual harassment and sexual assault is expanding people's understanding of what sexual harassment and assault is. And that is important, because you can say in any context: "Are you in favour of violence?", of course everyone would say they are not in favour of violence. But if you mean different things with the word violence, you can still completely misunderstand each other in many contexts. So that is something I have come to think of as really important in intercultural dialogue. And then, I think a third thing I would like to mention is: I have come to think it is important not to take ourselves so seriously. Because the world is full of people who are the most important in their context, but as soon as you step two kilometres in some direction, no one else knows who that is. And so, it is really important to realize that there are lots of great people in the world and that we should not take ourselves too seriously.

EWR: So, for our last question: Where do you go from here? What's next?

FRJ: Well, first of all, I am in the middle of working on two book manuscripts and lots of articles, so I am going to continue with similar research to what we have been talking about, and I am very excited about several of those projects. As of next month I am also starting as Associate Professor at the Political Science Department at the University of Oslo. So I will start teaching this fall, I am very excited about that. I will get to teach both qualitative and quantitative research methods, and also to get to teach courses related to my research on state approaches to inequality. And so I am very excited about getting to share more of my work with students and to be part of developing their projects, as that is something I find extremely inspiring.

EWR: Well, Dr. Jensenius, thank you very much for speaking with us today, and congratulations again on being the 2018 Nils Klim Laureate.

FRJ: Thank you.