

Janet Box-Steffensmeier of The Ohio State University was awarded a 2025 Barry Prize for Distinguished Intellectual Achievement. In [this video](#), Brandice Canes-Wrone of Stanford University interviews Dr. Box-Steffensmeier about how better social science methods help citizens make sense of their world, why interdisciplinary curiosity is growing among students, and the encouraging growth of better practices like replication, data sharing and hypothesis registration.

Brandice Canes-Wrone, Stanford University

I'm delighted to have Janet Box-Steffensmeier with me today, a winner of this year's Barry Prize for Distinguished Intellectual Achievement. Jan is the Vernal Riffe Professor of Political Science, Professor of Sociology by Courtesy and Distinguished University Professor at The Ohio State University. She was an Inaugural Fellow of the Society for Political Methodology and a member of the 2017 class of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, where she's held too many leadership roles to name. She's been the president of the American Political Science Association, the Political Methodology Society, and the Midwest Political Science Association. Jan has also won numerous academic awards prior to winning the Barry Prize. Since this is a short interview, we're not going to list all of those and dive right into a bit of what Jan's thinking about her field and the academy today. Jan, thanks so much for joining us.

Janet Box-Steffensmeier, The Ohio State University

Thank you for the invitation. I'm still on cloud nine from the Barry Prize, so I'm just delighted to be able to speak with you today.

Canes-Wrone

What are some underappreciated ways the work done in your field contributes to human understanding and well-being? You can define your field as you like, since you've contributed to many areas of political science, as well as to sociology and to methodology broadly.

Box-Steffensmeier

I want to start with focusing on political science, which helps people understand systems that shape their lives, and the tools that are used. In many ways, I did think about reflecting about social science more generally, too. But in political science, we're helping people make sense of their political life. We can clarify how representation works, why governments make certain choices and, more generally across the social sciences, how collective decisions unfold. Those are some of the most unappreciated behind-the-scenes social science things that we bring to the table.

Even the technical work you mentioned, methodology, really helps people feel less disoriented and more capable of constructive engagement in democracy. To take it into our universities – data, theory, methods – those three things help what we teach to our students to think about. These can be empowering because data can shed light on new questions and what we're answering. Theory is underpinning so many things that we do in the social sciences and living the good life, so to speak, too. A lot of our campuses teach these bigger picture classes that touch on political philosophy or psychology and bring in social science and our collective world.

Then, of course, the methodology. The methods are important for the integrity of the questions and getting at them correctly. This can be quantitative and qualitative. I certainly encourage both approaches. In terms of the methodological tools, which are sometimes overlooked, I've been particularly interested in dynamics and change. When we consider dynamics and change, we can get better theoretical leverage on our world and how it's changing and new theoretical insights. I focus a lot on time series, about history and network analysis, because they underpin research in things that people automatically care about, like public health, the economy, but also policy. Pick your favorite policy, health policy, education policy, etc. We're computational social sciences in very systematic ways. The tools that we use are going to help us define our policy choices.

So, in many ways, the social sciences and political science, including the methods, are very quiet, but have meaningful impact behind what we might read about in the newspapers or read about in our policy journals or see in the legislation that might come through our state legislatures. We hope that there are white papers and the work that we're doing will have this meaningful shaping of policy evaluation, risk assessment and, more generally, understanding human behavior at scale.

Canes-Wrone

What has pleasantly surprised you in your work over the past five years?

Box-Steffensmeier

AI is hitting all of our campuses, right? We read a lot of different things about how it's changing our world. One thing that has been really exciting to me is the enthusiasm and the independence that students are using in exploring these tools. I like to bring together interdisciplinary teams. I'll often pair a social science student with a computer science student or a statistics student. I have a large undergraduate lab with 25 undergrads, a couple of grad students and postdoc. I love seeing their creativity and how they are designing and modeling and accepting these tools in computational social science, not as hurdles, but as opportunities. A lot of the computer science students are coming over looking for social science data, data for good, if you will. It's been really exciting to see their creativity; their independence or willingness to question assumptions has been energizing and inspiring.

Just one example of a project that we're working on. About 70 Supreme Court cases are heard every year. For decades, hundreds of law students have been coding what the substantive and legal issues are in those cases. This American Institutions and Methodology Lab that I run has scraped the 7,000 or so cases that the Supreme Court has been *asked* to hear every year from 1945 to the present. We've got computer science students scraping the data, building a database and using large language models to do that same thing to ask, what is the Supreme Court being asked to hear? Then we can start to look at which voices reach the highest court in the land. Understanding that really is crucial in a democracy.

The other really exciting thing has been the momentum toward openness in research. Similarly, with that database that I'm creating, I can't wait to ask a couple of questions, write a couple of articles and then release it to people. There's really been a momentum for replication, sharing our code, preregistration, and this really propels research forward. There's been this cultural shift toward clarity, collaboration and, really, credibility that's super important for I don't care which part of science you're working in. This credibility is really important. Sharing our data and our code is a change that I feel is really welcome as well.

Canes-Wrone

I very much agree. That's great. And that's exciting. I love hearing about how people are incorporating AI into their undergraduate training. As you said, it seems the undergrads are jumping into the deep end in a good way, are happy to use it and know that they're going to be using it outside the academy as well.

So, pulling back just a little, universities have been in the news a lot recently, sometimes for good and the innovations we're producing, sometimes with a little bit of controversy. How do you think we're doing in terms of balancing the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake with the desire to make knowledge useful in the world? Where do you think we need to improve? Even if we're doing a great job, how can we up that further?

Box-Steffensmeier

The universities are doing a good job of encouraging curiosity-driven and applied work to coexist. One practical way is the interdisciplinary centers that we have on campus. All of our campuses have these, and it brings us from across campus to meet people, to get out of our paradigms, to be able to discuss ideas and blow it open, if you will, and see where we're coming from. Also, in political science, we've always had good deference toward trying to be open to students where they are. If they say X, we say Y, if they say Y, we say X. Part of that is our recognition in political science that students are at a point in their lives when they will change positions often. We've always been very respectful of that. In political science, it's been a long tradition. That's been good.

Jumping back to the curiosity-driven along with the applied, which goes across the ideological spectrum, we also have been really good at industry partnerships, making it easier to connect our scholarship to real-world problems. Even in political science now, we're starting our own companies and IP and getting it out there. For example, there are companies that look at bias in survey research and how to interpret it and how to read newspapers, etc. These industry partnerships and the interdisciplinary centers we're doing really well.

Our institutions are really supporting public-facing engaged scholarship. That's very different from when you and I started. Just at my own institution as a land grant, our model of education for citizenship has led to priorities that emphasize excellence, opportunity and public service. That has also encouraged faculty to say, how can I get what I'm doing out there? It's not enough to publish it in a journal and throw it up on my bookshelf behind me. We really need instead to think about engaged scholarship and presenting this to the public.

Where we need to improve is that the pendulum can swing too far to short-term measurable impact. That would be a real tragedy for American universities and universities worldwide in losing our edge. We have to have transformative ideas that often begin with questions that don't have an immediate application. We need to be able to allow scholars to have the independence to take that moonshot and protect that foundational, conceptual, methodological work as central, not peripheral, to our mission in our universities. We have to be careful there. Not every project needs to be useful. But when research informs our public conversations, we also have to be very clear and to do that with integrity when we get out there and we talk to the public. When universities preserve room for discovery and support thoughtful public engagement, that's when we fulfill our mission to advance knowledge for society.

Canes-Wrone

Excellent. Jan, it's always a pleasure to talk with you, but it's been a real treat today to hear your thoughts on these important issues that are, as you pointed out, affecting the academy broadly as well as the areas in which you're an expert.

Box-Steffensmeier

Well, thank you so much. It's always great to see you, and it was a real pleasure.