Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Kathleen S. Sullivan and Patricia Strach

JVN [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every week I sit down for a gorgeous conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious, honey. And I hope it makes you curious, too! On today's episode, we are joined by not one but two major people, Kathleen Sullivan and Patricia Strach, where I ask them: What are the dirty politics of American trash collection? Welcome to Getting Curious. This is Jonathan Van Ness. Honey, we have a very special episode for you because we have not one, but two experts. Now, you know this about me: I love a historical drama, and today's episode is delivering in gorgeous, big, dirty, smelly heaps, honey. We are getting curious about the history of trash collection in the United States. It's a story of local politics, public health, and racial and gender hierarchies and a whole lot of mess, honey, as you could predict. As this week's guests write in their new book, "The fact that trash collection today is viewed as mundane, even nonpolitical, is nothing short of a remarkable government accomplishment." Because, honey, this was, like, a whole bunch of tea. Now let's introduce our guests. First, we have Patricia Strach, who is a Professor of Political Science and Public Administration and Policy at the University of Albany, SUNY. Yes! And then we have Kathleen S. Sullivan, who's an Associate Professor of Political Science at Ohio University. They are the authors of the new book *The Politics of Trash: How Governments Used Corruption to Clean Cities from 1890 to 1929*. Oh, my God, it's giving Gilded Age realness, you guys. We can't even stand it. Published by Cornell University Press. Our guiding question today is, "What are the dirty politics of American trash collection?" First of all, how are both of you?

PATRICIA STRACH [00:01:42] We're doing great.

KATHLEEN SULLIVAN [00:01:44] We love to talk trash.

JVN [00:01:46] So let's take it back. It's 1890. President Benjamin Harrison is in office. You're walking down the streets of an American city. How much of a hot mess is that city? Like, is there just garbage everywhere? Or is it kind of cute and, like, there's horses and it's kind of cute and quaint?

PATRICIA STRACH [00:02:03] It is a giant mess. First thing that you would see is there may not be any sewers. And if there were sewers, there'd be open sewers. And so you would see human waste, animal waste, slaughterhouse waste, industrial waste kind of sitting in the streets, either going through those sewers or just kind of out there. There'd be piles of trash and discarded objects. So it'd be really kind of hard to pass through. So city streets were, were not pleasant places. They'd be hard to walk through. You would see those cute horses that you're talking about. But, you know, with horses come manure. So you'd also have that kind of filling up the streets and, you know, carts passing through it and people walking through it. And if you looked up in the sky, you'd see really smoky skies. Right? Might be hazy and dark

because of the pollution coming from factories. So cities were not pleasant places. They're not the kind of places that you'd want to vacation in today if you were to go back in time.

KATHLEEN SULLIVAN [00:03:00] There was a time when cities were not that densely populated, when people could just take care of it themselves. Maybe, like, a farmer would come by and he'd be, like, "Hey, I'll buy your food waste." He'd take it out to his farm and feed his hogs. So it kind of worked out for everybody. And that's nice when cities are smaller. But when they start industrializing and people are packing into these tenements and neighborhoods, this just isn't possible anymore. And so what you're seeing is that people are trying to get rid of their garbage. They might be burying it in their privy, the privy are the outdoor toilets in the backyard. And they might just bury their garbage in the privy. Right. Or maybe somebody in a more middle class neighborhood or someone decides they do want to hire a scavenger, say. A scavenger would take people's garbage on a cart and haul it away. But even then, he might just dump it on an empty lot somewhere because there were no regulations. And if there were regulations, the Board of Health set the regulations, but they had no enforcement power. So even if people were trying to do the right thing, this was a problem you couldn't handle individually.

PATRICIA STRACH [00:04:12] In Pittsburgh, it was 16 feet tall in these empty lots. Right? So it's not just like they're throwing a little bit. It's piling up, and then, you know, they're dumping it in water. It's creating all kinds of problems.

JVN [00:04:25] So not to put *The Gilded Age* on blast, but, like, are those streets of New York in that show, like, a little bit too forgiving? Because they were giving me kind of, like, clean and cute or was, like, the Upper West Side, just, like, kind of rich? And so they, like, did keep it cleaner.

KATHLEEN SULLIVAN [00:04:38] They are pretty sanitized. I mean, granted, there is a guy, right, who rolls out the cart. He rolls out that cart with the barrel and he sweeps up the horse manure and puts it in. And so maybe he's dedicated to that street. But really what we find is that cities lack the capacity to keep up. Even if they had street sweepers, they could not keep up with the horse poop. So it was just going to keep coming.

JVN [00:05:01] And so just to, like, set the stage: that was you, Kathleen. So and then when you said sewers before, Patricia, is that, like, they were, like, sewers *on* the street? Not, like, *under* the street, just, like, piles of poop and waste and, like, animal carcasses from slaughterhouses?

PATRICIA STRACH [00:05:18] Yeah. So this is the same time that cities are putting in underground sewer lines. So sometimes cities had those, sometimes they worked, sometimes they didn't. Some cities just kind of had open sewers kind of running down the streets. And some cities had no sewers. So, yes, there would be all kinds of mess that you can imagine runs through sewers and then everything else gets kind of just dumped in there.

JVN [00:05:44] So you can't wear cute shoes, first of all, fucking white shoes are out of the question. Excuse me: like, *white shoes* are out of the question. Not f'in. I don't know why I said a cuss word around, like, two college professors, Jonathan, get out of here. Were people just getting, like, food poisoning because, like, they were getting, like, little, like, horse poops in their mouth or something?

KATHLEEN SULLIVAN [00:06:01] Yeah. So sanitarians were keeping an eye on garbage, compromised water supplies, sewage, and the dirty streets. And so they were really worried, right? Like, maybe you'd have a garbage in a barrel that's sitting on a sidewalk, which also is not in the *Gilded Age* set. There would just be these piles of garbage sitting on the sidewalk. Right. It would just be, like, meat, fish. Just vegetable waste. A dog comes and knocks it over. Right. And then that's going to go into the sewers. Or maybe somebody just buried garbage in their backyard. And then when a good rain comes that slides down the hill and goes into the water supply. So sanitarians saw all of this actual physical connection between products and they realized that there was a spread of disease. Right. And so, yes, there were public health risks. And they were absolutely recognized by experts at the time.

JVN [00:06:55] Were sanitarians, like, a cute known group of people who were, like, "We're sanitarians," like, back then?

KATHLEEN SULLIVAN [00:07:02] Absolutely, absolutely. They were medical doctors. They were in the American Public Health Association. They were in city governments through boards of health. Those existed back through the 19th century. So, yes, they were a known quantity.

JVN [00:07:18] Are you telling me that, like, in, like, cute old school London, it was full of, like, poopy carcasses, too, and stuff, like, it was all nasty in London? Where were they doing it nice? Like, who did we copy cat off of? Or do we make, like, up our own cool, like, unique way of staying clean-er?

KATHLEEN SULLIVAN [00:07:35] Yeah. So there were also these other experts at the time. There were municipal reformers who were starting to organize. Gilded Age might be early, but they were starting to organize and they would go on these field trips. And so they might go to Germany and they might say, "How are you setting up your incineration plant or something?" And so, yeah, they would go around to other states, other countries, and look for best practices. They networked.

JVN [00:08:01] [CLAPS] I love it!

PATRICIA STRACH [00:08:02] And they do that in the U.S., too. They would go around to other cities because the same problem is happening in cities across the United States. Right. So people are moving into cities; the traditional ways they got rid of their trash—which was to

burn it, to bury it or to feed it to pigs—don't work when you're moving, living in these very crowded spaces. So cities across the country have the same problem at the same time and they're looking for an answer and it's not clear what's the right thing to do. So they're driving around to different cities, they're visiting other places. They're, they're networking. They're talking to each other. They're trying to figure out what's the right answer.

JVN [00:08:42] Was it the sanitarians that were all, like, raising alarms or was it other people, like, who was calling attention to the overflow issue?

PATRICIA STRACH [00:08:49] Well, there's a number of groups who are kind of pointing the finger and saying, "This is a problem." So we have the sanitarians who are saying it, we have the civic organizations. So these might be, you know, a growing middle class. And so there's women and there's business people. And they get together and they form these civic associations. They want better communities. And one of the things they want is cleaner communities. And so they're pointing out things like the growth of, of trash, as a problem. And so they're telling government, "You have to do something about it." And governments are perfectly willing to just take their idea when it suits them, when they can find a way to make money or to get political power from it. And then they kind of largely keep these people at arm's length. They don't want the good government types in their business because they're not doing things on the up and up. So they'll take the ideas when it suits them and when they can gain political power or money from it. And then otherwise they kind of just push these people to the side.

KATHLEEN SULLIVAN [00:09:49] And another group that got involved, which might seem unexpected, are businessmen, because we often think of business people as opposed to government regulation. But businessmen in these cities wanted the streets clean because literally for commerce to move, you need to be able to have horses and carts move down the road. And so business associations in different cities would collect money and offer cities. They would say, "We will give you horses and carts if you will start picking up garbage." It's because a clean city was good for business.

JVN [00:10:29] So let's say that you're consulting, like, you go back to *The Gilded Age*, you consult Julian Fellowes on HBO's *The Gilded Age*. Julian Fellowes wants a plotline all about the switch to a municipal trash collection system. Can you tease for us where the episode begins?

KATHLEEN SULLIVAN [00:10:44] It starts on a sidewalk. There are a lot of people and a lot of animals, a lot of animals scurrying underneath. Right. The street's gonna have horses who are clopping by. And *The Gilded Age* does have this man, right, with this barrel on wheels and he sweeps the streets. There were street cleaners at the time, but our street sweeper can't keep up with the horse manure. So now there's poop on the street. Carriages are trying to get around the manure. Maybe there's a barrel of trash on the sidewalk. It gets knocked over by a dog. Trash is spilling out. A rat scurries by. Maybe a scavenger's cart comes and picks up

whatever's left in that barrel. He dumps the contents in his cart, but his cart is uncovered. So as he's driving down the street, there's garbage coming out the top that might be leaking out the bottom. It is a mess.

JVN [00:11:34] And then, like, who are the characters? Like, who would we meet?

PATRICIA STRACH [00:11:39] Well, the first character's got to be a sanitarian. And this is someone who's trained at an Ivy League medical school, but he doesn't really have a very good bedside manner. So he decides to get involved in the field of public health. And there he can combine his, like, scientific knowledge with, with his ability to get something done and his investigative skills. And so he tracks down the spread of disease. He figures out what ought to be done to prevent this kind of thing in the future. And then he turns his attention to garbage.

JVN [00:12:13] Ooooh, okay! And so then, what's, like, the stakes? What's the intrigue? Who's the drama, like, like, what's the drama of the setup of the fix?

KATHLEEN SULLIVAN [00:12:22] So the sanitarian's mom is in a civic organization and she is a reformer and she is on it. And so she is keeping track of things. She'll scold the neighbor down the street. She'll scold the corrupt politician. She doesn't care. She also thinks her group came up with the idea for garbage collection. And the political machine is keeping her out of things, but she doesn't care. She keeps monitoring garbage collection. She checks and sees that the garbage collectors have left a can behind. She reports that. She sits on the street car and she watches people, men who are spitting and she has a notebook. She records that in her notebook. She gets an anti-expectoration ordinance passed.

JVN [00:13:06] I read that shit because they said that they were going to get tuberculosis from all the spitting, so they were really worried about the spitting. [CROSSTLAK] I read about that!

KATHLEEN SULLIVAN [00:13:11] Yes! And the city wasn't going to take care of it. She was going to. So even though the city kept pushing her out, she comes back in. She is persistent.

JVN [00:13:22] I named her Regina.

KATHLEEN SULLIVAN [00:13:23] Oh, yes. Yes, that's her!

JVN [00:13:27] So there's, like, her. And then, like what's, like, the mayor and, like, the city council do or whatever?

PATRICIA STRACH [00:13:33] Oh, yeah! There's the corrupt politician, right? So that corrupt politician is running the show, is making the backroom deals. Does not like this, you know, sanitarian's mom, the civic club woman. Happy to steal her ideas, happy to use those ideas, intimidated by her, and doesn't want her anywhere near him.

JVN [00:13:55] So in your book and I love that, I just, like, ah! I love, like, two power lady historians, like, writing a fucking book. Sorry, why do I keep cussing, you guys. I was on tour this week and I'm just really cussy potty mouth. I really like, I don't know what it is, like, being on the road. Like, I regressed, like, 13 years. I don't know what happens. I'm going to try to work on that. But in your book you focus on trash collection in five cities, which I just thought was fascinating. In the book you choose Pittsburgh, St. Louis, Charleston, New Orleans and Columbus. What drew you each to those cities, like, was it, like, a rich plethora of, like, historical stuff to draw from, like, what was it?

PATRICIA STRACH [00:14:29] We were looking for cities that looked like the United States at the time. So, you know, when we talk about garbage, when we talk about corruption, people always kind of throw New York out there, New York City. But we weren't looking for the biggest, kind of flashiest cities at the time, we want to say, "This is happening across the country in large cities, but not the largest, most famous cities at the, at the time." So that's why we're choosing, you know, Pittsburgh and not Philadelphia and St. Louis and not Chicago. And, you know, New Orleans is in there, too, San Francisco. So we're looking at, at big, important cities, but not kind of the ones that are different from the other cities in the U.S.

JVN [00:15:07] You really did a good job because it's giving, like, Americana. It's giving, like, like, you really hit that on the head. How did this new system come into play, like, did each city, like, adopt a new system at different times? Or was there, like, a national revolution towards, like, a different way of trash collecting?

KATHLEEN SULLIVAN [00:15:26] There was a sort of wave of garbage ordinances that occurred in about the mid-1890s, so not at the very same moment, but within that period, just the mid-1890s, a lot of cities started to pass new garbage ordinances and so it was kind of an era of municipal reform. Again, people were networking. So it did happen—not consistently—but through a network, through a kind of movement. Yes. You see a lot of new garbage ordinances being passed at that time.

JVN [00:15:59] How did the new municipal trash system function in different cities? Like, how did people store their trash in different garbage pick-ups?

KATHLEEN SULLIVAN [00:16:08] So that was going to depend on the city. And so cities have different climates. So in some cities, they might only need to collect once a week. But in a city with warmer weather, in the summer, they might collect four times a week. Some cities collected six times a week in the summer. And then also cities had different resources and different relationships with residents. So even literally where residents left their trash can was going to depend on where they could get the people to put their trash down. They wanted people to put their trash cans out by the curb, but people weren't really always willing to comply. In that case, they might just say, "Oh, we're going to leave it next to our house." And then the garbage collector would have to go run back over by the kitchen and get the trash.

He might bring a little pail and then scoop the trash from that person's garbage can into his little pail and then run that back out to the truck. It all depended on the city.

JVN [00:17:03] Whereas now they're, like, "Go fuck yourself. If it's not out here on this street corner, we will not pick it up." Like you have to, like, you got to play by the rules, honey.

KATHLEEN SULLIVAN [00:17:10] Exactly!

JVN [00:17:12] Some places in Europe, like, you can't bring it outside before 8:00 at night. And then even in America, like, some it's like 4:00 in the afternoon. Like, that's just so interesting and different. Like, because when I lived in New York, we either had, like, a trash chute or there was just, like, a place in the front of the building where you could just, like, go put it and then, like, someone else would, like, bring it out at the correct time, you know? But it's, like, if you don't have, like, a dumpster in front of your house or whatever, like, you can't even bring it outside until that time of day.

PATRICIA STRACH [00:17:39] And it doesn't necessarily make cities cleaner to say you can't put it out at a particular time because the garbage is sitting somewhere. So this is why having six pickups a week actually does keep a city cleaner, right? Because you're taking it off of the streets, out of people's homes, and getting it somewhere else.

JVN [00:17:56] Yeah, we like that story. So, like, each one of these cities, like, Charleston, St Louis, Pittsburgh, New Orleans, Columbus, they all have completely different versions of, like, how they collect their trash.

PATRICIA STRACH [00:18:07] Yes, how they collect it and how they dispose of it. Each city has a different way of doing each of those things.

KATHLEEN SULLIVAN [00:18:16] We can tell you the ways.

JVN [00:18:18] Yeah, tell me, I want to know!

KATHLEEN SULLIVAN [00:18:20] You want to hear about Saint Louis?

JVN [00:18:21] Yes. Dying. I'm, like, from only, like, 2 hours away from Saint Louis.

KATHLEEN SULLIVAN [00:18:25] Okay, so Saint Louis tried to make a reduction plant like Pittsburgh and it failed. So they ended up dumping garbage on an island, Chesley Island, in the middle of the Mississippi River. They would just take it out there and spread the garbage around. The plan was that they would plow that garbage under, but it started to pile up so much that they sent hogs out to Chesley Island to eat the garbage on the island.

JVN [00:18:56] And then did the hogs, like, die or something? I guess eventually. But, like, is that how they dealt with the garbage? Like, the hogs all just went and ate it all?

PATRICIA STRACH [00:19:03] But they didn't. They couldn't keep up with the amount of garbage. This is the fourth largest city at the time, they couldn't keep up with the amount of garbage. So then St. Louis just starts dumping it in the Mississippi. So sorry if you live downstream from St. Louis, you're getting their trash.

JVN [00:19:19] Rude of them!

KATHLEEN SULLIVAN [00:19:21] So in New Orleans, they just dumped it in the river. They would just put it on these little barges and take them out to the river. Charleston started garbage collecting in 1806. Because Charleston's on this peninsula. And so the way to fill out the land was they would put garbage at the edges of the land to actually just increase the kind of footprint of Charleston. So it was an incentive for early garbage collection. They used enslaved labor. They would hire out slaves. So they had this source of labor that they just used for city purposes.

JVN [00:19:56] Was there a lot of corruption, like, in the setting up of…?

PATRICIA STRACH [00:19:59] Yes, there was a lot of corruption. And one of the things that's really interesting about the story of American politics. When we look at the creation of these garbage programs, we've just told you how disgusting these cities are. How there's, you know, piles of waste lying in the streets. But the political leaders of these cities aren't looking at those piles and saying, "Gosh, we got to get something done." They decide that they're going to address that mess when they find a way that they can benefit either financially or politically from it. And that's the corrupt piece, right? When they say, "Hey, I can find a way to line my pockets if I create garbage collection programs." *That's* when they're motivated to do something. And then the type of garbage collection and disposal services they set up are different in each of these cities, and it's different because of the kind of corruption of the regime that's running the cities. Right. So when the corrupt regime, for example, in Pittsburgh, right, it's a political machine, it's the city treasurer and this, you know, Republican Party boss who's a businessman. And they say, you know, "Let's provide this service." They basically contract out to themselves. They contract out to the brother of the boss, which is a front for the boss himself. And they start to make tons of money from the service. So they are collecting trash and they're doing a relatively decent job, but they're doing it to enrich themselves and they make a lot of money from it.

KATHLEEN SULLIVAN [00:21:24] Because here's what was so impressive about Pittsburgh. It was so blatantly corrupt. But that brothers' company established a reduction plant. That was this whole new fangled sort of form of garbage disposal that dried and then burned garbage. And the idea was that it would extract grease and you could profit from it. Sanitarians found this to be the best form of garbage disposal for the time, but it was a lot of money to invest in

it. So it was actually sometimes these corrupt contracts that gave these people the incentive to build one of these newfangled reduction plants. And that's why corruption served as a kind of resource for governments.

JVN [00:22:09] Then St. Louis, that was like, what's, like, the oligarchy, like, boodle thing?

PATRICIA STRACH [00:22:14] St. Louis is an interesting place because they have, like, a democratically elected government, like we would assume is there, but they're really kind of controlled by these businessmen called The Cinc h. And so what The Cinch do is they bribe city officials to get contracts for lighting, for streetcars, for garbage. And they get these contracts, they bribe them, they pay a price, they get the contracts. And then this is the way they kind of line their pockets. And so in this case, their trash collection was in the hands of kind of the "chief briber." He was the one that took it over. And when the reform government came to power and was like, "We're tired of this corruption." They couldn't separate the trash collection services from the corruption, right, because they had no idea how to do it themselves. And so that's why they have this reduction plant and they start to put things on an island in the middle of the Mississippi River because no one knows how to run the reduction plant except for the corrupt people, and nobody else is willing to take it on. So that's what happens in Saint Louis.

JVN [00:23:18] So then Charleston, that's, like, just, like, tons of nepotism? Like, what happens there?

KATHLEEN SULLIVAN [00:23:24] So Charleston was really interesting because we would see these names of people in government early in the 19th century, and then you would see that name still in government later in the 19th century. So we call Charleston a "quasi-aristocracy." There were just leading families that ran government, right, before the Civil War, even up through the late 19th century. And Charleston was also the city, as we mentioned, that started garbage collection, municipal garbage collection, the earliest: 1806. They set up a city form of collection using enslaved labor. So what happens is that when the rest of the country starts passing waves of garbage ordinances in the 1890s, this aristocratic form of government is rather sluggish. They are not quick to innovate. So Charleston, even though it had the earliest form of collection, doesn't keep up with attempts to innovate in the 1890s. It just kind of keeps doing what it's doing. So it fell behind other cities.

JVN [00:24:26] And then what about Columbus?

KATHLEEN SULLIVAN [00:24:28] So we should mention that we don't really talk about Columbus very much in this book. We've talked about it elsewhere, though. So Columbus is neat because they tried to set up garbage collection in the 1890s that looked very similar to these other cities, where it's: people are complaining about it, it's not working. But Columbus gets its act together. And maybe in about the 1910s or so, they do get a reformed government that does have the capacity to, you know, get a new public works system set up.

And so Columbus ends up being possibly the least chaotic of the cities that we studied. We mention it because it was kind of just a not as problematic city, just to note that not every city was like this.

JVN [00:25:16] What's true of all five of these cities, is that, like, the solution and the systems that created garbage collection was not because people were getting sick. It wasn't because there was, like, organs in the streets, which there were. It wasn't, like, because people were getting really sick and groundwater was becoming, like, consistently contaminated. They all started like when someone was, like, "Oh, wait, we can make some money." And so, like, money was always the motivating thing. Like, not, like, public health.

PATRICIA STRACH AND KATHLEEN SULLIVAN [00:25:40] Yes!

PATRICIA STRACH [00:25:43] Yes! Money *or* political power. Right. So in New Orleans, it's a very weak political regime. And they're saying, "How can we build up our political power? How can we get people to vote for us?" So they are hiring, putting people on the city rolls to collect trash who are not collecting trash. It's a way of giving money to these, these folks. And then in return, they get votes, right? So they're buying votes, patronage. So it's really if they can make money or if they can get political power, they think, "Let's do trash collection. It's a good thing."

JVN [00:26:15] Because basically, like, none of these places, like, they wouldn't set up, like, fair competition. For instance, like, was it just, like, one place that you could go to to get your trash collection and if you pissed them off or they had, like, unfair rates or they just, like, wouldn't even take care of certain people, like, was the ways that they were also corrupt, like, outside of just not doing it for the right reasons? Were they also, like, ineffective?

KATHLEEN SULLIVAN [00:26:35] Yeah, the city would have or create a monopoly where, like, "Everybody has to dump here." And if that's a private dump, yes, they would charge the rates or maybe the rates if you loaded garbage on a boat, which is what happened in San Francisco. Yes, absolutely. There were these monopoly arrangements.

JVN [00:26:53] And so then, like, once they're established, like, how did, like, trash collectors step into these systems? Like, was there, like, a recruitment thing? Like, "It pays great to be a trash person"? Like, was it only, like, men? Was it men and women? Like, how did that process work?

KATHLEEN SULLIVAN [00:27:07] To study this project, we started by going to archives and looking at official city reports. And what's really interesting is that you'll learn a lot, but there's just a lot that we don't know because there's a lot that the cities wouldn't talk about. So the actual characteristics of garbage collectors is something that wasn't important to them or they did not record that. And we do know from outside sources, W.E.B. Dubois, for example, at the time was paying attention to garbage collection because garbage collection was being

delivered so unequally, right? Poor neighborhoods, Black neighborhoods were being underserved in all of the services that we're talking about. And so people like Dubois and other organizations at the time would document this. And that's how we know how unequally delivered garbage collection was. But if you look at the city records themselves, they don't tell you. So the information about who they hired, how they hired. We don't really have that information.

JVN [00:28:14] Do we know about, like, how, like, people were treated that worked for, like, garbage collection systems or, like, cities?

PATRICIA STRACH [00:28:20] Yeah, they were treated very poorly. They were often ignored. They were disciplined. They were made to ring a bell. They were made to wear a uniform, which often they had to buy themselves, their required clothing. They were watched very closely by neighbors who would register complaints. So this was not a profession that was treated very well at the time.

KATHLEEN SULLIVAN [00:28:43] And then what would happen is: so a city was collecting garbage. We know that they weren't doing the best job of it, and once in a while they'd get in trouble for it. And so here's this city. It's corrupt. It is, you know, underperforming. They're getting blamed once in a while for poor garbage collection. They can't blame the other party because this is the party in power. Right. So who do they blame? They look around and they blame the garbage collectors. And the garbage collectors are, in many of these cities, are predominantly Black and they are singled out. And so there would be these odd moments when all of a sudden you would hear a lot about garbage collectors, maybe in the Streets Department annual report. He might say, "Well, we're doing a great job, but we gotta get those garbage collectors to work harder." Maybe a newspaper would come out and kind of mark garbage collectors as, you know, not working fast enough. And what we see is that that is when the social inequality of race kicks in. Right. It was kind of a legible sort of nod to say, like, "Oh, those workers aren't doing their part." What we find is that it would occur when cities were trying to deflect blame from themselves.

JVN [00:30:01] That sounds about right, like, what would if, like, the city changed political party leadership? Like, what happens if someone got voted out? Like, was there ever a story of, like, someone, like, coming in and, like, cleaning up that messy system and, like, being nicer to the people?

PATRICIA STRACH [00:30:16] Yeah. So they would come in and the first thing they would do is they'd come in and be, like, “This place is a mess.” And so that's when you would see all of these reports about how dirty the streets are and what a horrible job the city had done, because they were now going to blame the previous administration and they were going to say they were going to do better. But even when they were saying they were going to do better, they're still relying on the exact same infrastructure. It's the same collectors. It's the same disposal. So are they doing better? Most often they were not doing better. And then

suddenly the reports in the city archives get, you know, it's glowing. You know, "Garbage collection has never been so good in our city." And it's really not the case.

JVN [00:30:58] Ah! Was there ever a time when it was, like, bad, and then it really did get good?

KATHLEEN SULLIVAN [00:31:03] Yes. Yes. So one city is actually Pittsburgh, which actually, as we said, they did a pretty good job garbage collecting. But the regime was so corrupt. So in the 1910s or so, there was this new Reform Party that comes in and they take over. And so the government has a lot more integrity, but they come in and they realize, "We don't have the resources to replace this garbage collection program." So they continue to contract out with that company that was owned by the brother of the corrupt politician because it was so much better than anything else they could have provided.

JVN [00:31:42] So they kind of, like, went back then they were, like, "Well, you just did such a good job." Like, "We're going to go back."

KATHLEEN SULLIVAN [00:31:46] Yeah, yeah!

PATRICIA STRACH [00:31:47] They kind of basically said, "We can't do it any better," and they did it for decades. This wasn't just, like, a couple of years' transition. This was decades because this corrupt machine built an effective infrastructure. They could actually do what they were supposed to be doing.

JVN [00:32:05] So what do you think is the significance of so many trash collectors being from the same communities that were also being so underserved by this, like, very same trash collection system?

KATHLEEN SULLIVAN [00:32:15] Pittsburgh is a city that was predominantly white, started to get new immigrant communities around this time. And then in the earlier 20th century, you start to see the Great Migration, right, where Black workers from the South are moving up to the north. So the demographics of Pittsburgh were changing. But then what would happen is that Pittsburgh would say, "Okay, we have all these new workers, but there are certain jobs that are really jobs for Black people. That that is just set aside." So they would just really segregate the jobs themselves. And so garbage collection would end up being one of those jobs with, along with, like, domestic servants, arbors, valets, that sort of thing. And, and so I guess it's just part of larger patterns of segregation, right?

JVN [00:33:02] Systemic racism, yeah.

KATHLEEN SULLIVAN [00:33:03] Yeah, yeah, yeah.

JVN [00:33:05] Which I think is another, like, I mean, let me, like, brainstorm this out, but I think it's just, like, another example of, like, why, like, separate is not fucking equal. Just, people deserve equal access to opportunities economically and with jobs and stuff. And that means, like, the difference between getting to go be, like, a scientist and a garbage collector. I mean, nothing that is wrong with being a garbage collector if, like, that's what—, you love, like, getting out early in the morning, honey, and you like a physical job and you like to be on, like, the back of a car, honey, and, like, be off by whatever time or whatever. Like, like, it could be great for some people, but, like, everyone should get a chance to, like, study what they want to study and, like, learn what they want to learn. And you can't really do that when you have people, like, mandating segregation in any way from a government level.

KATHLEEN SULLIVAN [00:33:51] You know, that's such a great point. And the other thing is that garbage collectors themselves thought of themselves as workers like any other industrial worker. Right. And sometimes in some cities they might strike or stand up for themselves to get better wages and working conditions. So, again, there's nothing wrong with garbage collection, but when it's being classed, right, then that becomes an occupation that is then denigrated. And so that in itself is, there's a kind of story that's told about it socially, which makes it hard, then, for other people in the town to recognize that this is really a worthy job with workers that deserve all the rights that any other worker deserves.

PATRICIA STRACH [00:34:37] I think the irony is with garbage collectors, when you look at what happened in cities, the mortality rates were, were just crazy compared to rural areas. That people were dying in droves. And the, the, you know, the switch that, that made cities safe to live in were the sewers and were the garbage collectors. Right. And so in one way, if you think about who's preventing death and who is, is increasing the quality of life, it's these people that we then think, "Oh, that's a dirty job. That's only for 'those' kind of people." It's almost ironic how important they are to the basic kind of life that we lead today and how little respect that they get for that.

JVN [00:35:20] Yeah, 100%. And then in the book you write that, "Political development does not necessarily mean progress." Let's say that again, two times fast. “Political development does not necessarily mean progress." And that, "in the case of garbage collection, 19th century innovations carry over 19th century biases."

PATRICIA STRACH [00:35:40] So we work in a field called American Political Development, and that looks at durable shifts in governing authority. And they're looking at things like railroads and administrative agencies. And what we find, and what they find, and what we find in our own work is a lot of those biases that we talked about, like, this is how these governments get programs to work is through, you know, racial hierarchy, through gender hierarchy. Getting women to model the kind of behavior that they want from their citizens.

JVN [00:36:10] Mm.

PATRICIA STRACH [00:36:11] And that gets put into these garbage programs. And so over time, we're like, "I can't believe we have these inequalities," but we've baked them into the programs that we've created, and we are still using those same programs, that same infrastructure today. So it's not a surprise that we have a lot of the same perspectives about garbage collectors today that they did in the 19th century. It's not a surprise that we go into neighborhoods and we say, "This neighborhood is dirty," and not that it's underserved. We attribute the, the dirtiness of the neighborhood, to the people who live there, and the dirtiness of garbage collecting, to the people who collect trash and not seeing it in these kind of broader ways, that these biases kind of get stuck in to these programs. And these programs persist for, you know, decades or centuries. And then those biases come along with them.

JVN [00:37:00] Yeah, it's, like, you take away that garbage collection in, like, a fuckin' rich neighborhood, and it's going to be nasty as shit in, like, 3 seconds, you know?

PATRICIA STRACH [00:37:07] Yes. Yes.

JVN [00:37:08] I just spent, you know, all summer in New Orleans. And one thing that really stuck out to me about living in New Orleans—and I'd never been there before I worked there all summer—it is striking the way that you can see the difference in economic prosperity by neighborhood. Like, you will have, like, these streets that are, like, these ornate, like, stunning, you know, really expensive homes. And then, like, two streets over. It's, like, not like that. I can imagine that in those days, like, you know, whether it was, like, Magazine or whether it's, like, that one street that's like out of those pretty old houses where like that train track runs through. They probably weren't having garbage, like, stacking up there in the way that they were in, like, other areas. So how did that manifest, like, the policies of trash pickup in these municipalities?

KATHLEEN SULLIVAN [00:37:51] We can talk about how women came to matter in that, in that situation. So, again, women were really concerned about garbage before there were these municipal ordinances. They got pushed aside by the political machines. But then in about the 1910s, cities realized that they had all these systems set up, but residents were not complying with the order to put their garbage can out. And that was a real problem for cities. You know, if people didn't put their garbage cans out properly, none of this was going to work. So they actually turned to women. So there were these women, still in civic organizations, and they would model good behavior for how to use a garbage can. They would make these little kitchen cards, like these little index cards, with rules for how to put out your garbage can, put a lid on it so the dogs don't knock it over, clean it out after you bring it back inside. And they were middle class women who would go to poor neighborhoods, or working class neighborhoods, and instruct housewives about how to handle their garbage. And we have some pictures, if you would like to see ways in which this was enacted.

JVN [00:39:08] We love a visual aid.

KATHLEEN SULLIVAN [00:39:10] Oh, good. So here's this ad. It's for the Witts Can. And it's really cute, right? We're looking at a little picture of a little tiny trash can, a metal trash can with a lid on top and there's a little dog and he's leaning against it. But the title says, "He can't push it off." And so the idea was that people could buy trash cans like this and they would stay nice and tidy on the curb. Now, here's how we read this ad. This was in *Good Housekeeping* magazine in about 1916, 1917. This is being pitched to housewives. It's a way for women, right, who are in control of the kitchen and the, you know, sanitary nature of the home to really keep a tidy home. But remember, dogs knocking over trash cans was actually one of the major sanitary problems that sanitarians had identified decades before. So what you see is that by women keeping things tidy and taking pride in it and consuming goods that allow them to do that, they are actually upholding the needs that the sanitarians had identified.

JVN [00:40:20] Mm! I can't even believe there was, like, advertisements that long ago. It's so interesting when you think about it. It's, like, over 100 years ago. Is there any other ones in here that we say that peruse through?

KATHLEEN SULLIVAN [00:40:29] Yes. How about the next page?

PATRICIA STRACH [00:40:32] Once cities create these programs, they have to put trash out. There's all these rules that kind of filter back into the house. Right. So some cities, remember Kathleen was talking about they're burning their trash and they're selling the grease. So food waste has to be separate from tin cans and shoes. Right. So who is going to be doing that separating? It's the people who are working in that house. It's the housewife. Right. And so here's some—we're looking at some pictures here of—different innovations being sold again in Good Housekeeping to housewives for things that they can do to participate in garbage programs, keeping their home tidy and doing a good job. So there's the Amico Refuse Can, right? So it allows them to get rid of trash in their home. There is the garbage bag, right. That's a big innovation. You don't have to wipe your trash can out. You can put things in this tidy garbage bag. You don't have to wrap your trash, which is also a very messy thing to do. And then on the right, there's the Majestic Coals to Chute. Right, which is going to… Kathleen, how does this work? It shoots trash out to the streets. Is that what it's doing?

KATHLEEN SULLIVAN [00:41:42] No, so, so, right, so if you had coal in your house, you would have this little, like, hole in the side of your house. And so the coal man would come by, he'd open up that little window and dump coal into your house. That's kind of a standard thing that people with, like 100-year-old houses still have. So what they did was they, they're taking that same kind of little window and they're saying, "Why not repurpose that?" And maybe you could just have one of those little holes in your wall that you would keep your garbage there. So instead of keeping it in the kitchen or keeping it outside, you have your own little packed up coal chute. [LAUGHS]

JVN [00:42:20] How chic! I love old stuff. I can't even handle it. So… oooh! So how did communities, like, push back against these policies or, like, the inequitable ones? Like, was there ever anyone who was, like, "This shit's unfair. We need more, like, more pickup," or were people just, like "We don't want to put our trash out." Or was there people on both sides?

PATRICIA STRACH [00:42:42] Residents did not like these policies. So you can imagine, like, if you're used to burning something in your backyard or just throwing it out into the street, you don't want to be told that you have to separate your trash. You have to buy a can to stick it out on the street. You have to put it out at a certain time? Residents hated this. And so sometimes, like in New Orleans, the residents there got very upset and it led to the fall of the mayoral administration. [JVN GASPS] Right. They were really angry at these programs. And it didn't help that the mayor started to find them and threatened to throw them in jail if they didn't put this stuff out at the right time and the right place. So, yes, there was a lot of pushback in terms of residents not liking these programs.

KATHLEEN SULLIVAN [00:43:26] So here's what we found: people at first didn't want to put their garbage cans out. If you fine them, right, you're just making them mad. But if you start having ladies in town start to say, "Oh, I have newfangled devices, I keep my house clean, you should too." And it becomes a kind of social competition to have the cleanest house. All of a sudden, people are making what they think are personal choices, and they're actually ending up complying with the garbage ordinances. They're putting their cans out, and that is how the city gets people to comply, through this kind of social pressure. And now everybody thinks they're doing it because they want to.

JVN [00:44:08] So compared to the late 1800s, it's, like, been 120ish years since there's been more of these, like, trash pick up policies. How different is trash collection in the U.S. today? Like, what's changed and what stayed the same?

PATRICIA STRACH [00:44:24] Not much has changed, actually. I mean, what is really remarkable is how similar trash collection and disposal was then to how it looks now. So, yes, we have trucks instead of carts, and we have recycling and composting, which they didn't necessarily have at the time. But what's really different compared to the past is how we think about it. Right? At that time, this is such a hot button issue that if you were to walk around a town, those people would tell you exactly what they think about having to do something they don't want to do. And now, like, we say we wrote a book on trash collection. Our colleagues, these political scientists kind of give a chuckle. They're like, "Ha ha, that's so funny. That's not politics," because we've lost all of this. I mean, in a way, it's kind of remarkable. It's become such a habit that we don't think of it as, like, government power coming in and making us do something we don't want to do. And we've lost all of the politics of trash collection. I think that's what's really changed the most.

JVN [00:45:25] So do we still see the same inequalities and biases in the trash collection system as we used to?

KATHLEEN SULLIVAN [00:45:32] Yeah. So we are seeing that inequalities continue. So, you know, when you hear about the crisis in the water system in Flint, Michigan, right. Or we've heard about Jackson, Mississippi, that now has had a water crisis. And so Flint had lead in its water. And in Jackson, apparently the problem was with the water treatment plant. So it did have infrastructure set up at some time. But then in not keeping it up, that ended up damaging the water served to residents. And these are both predominantly Black cities. And so we are seeing neighborhoods, cities that continue to be underserved, not listen to people. You know, residents of Flint have spoken up and said, "We think there's something wrong with our water" and didn't get responses. There are some pretty amazing people out there who are keeping an eye on this. So Kathryn Flowers is an activist who's working on water quality and solid waste in rural areas in the South. In Philadelphia, there is a man named Terrell Hagler who goes by "Ya Fav Trash Man." He is a former trash collector who identifies empty lots in Philadelphia where there continues to be illegal dumping. He sets up cleanup days. He's running for city council to try to change it. So the stories that we saw 100, 120 years ago continue to return.

JVN [00:47:01] Wow. That's fascinating! That it's literally still happening. So what can the study of garbage collection teach us about governing, specifically about, like, supporting the people who keep cities running?

KATHLEEN SULLIVAN [00:47:14] Yeah. So when we set up our kitchens to sort recycling or set aside food waste for curbside composting or trot our garbage can go out and wave hi to our neighbor. We're performing domestic chores. We think we're doing this because, like, "Oh, we're tidy" or, you know, we're just, we'd like to be admired by our neighbors. But actually we are participating in enforcing public health measures, that we are actually participating in *needs* that the local government has. Government is not just about enforcing the law through punitive rules. There are times it requires the people to participate. And even if we internalize those rules and practice them as habits and even take pride in them as being an environmentalist or being a tidy neighbor, they can be seen as personal choice. But our government requires them for the public good. And we need to recognize that: that there's still a need for the public good and there's still a need for people to do something, to do their part to uphold the public good. Did that answer your question?

JVN [00:48:23] It did. Patricia, do you have anything to add?

PATRICIA STRACH [00:48:26] What is local politics? Like, you know, we're political scientists. So what's fascinating to us is that, you know, people think politics is, is, you know, participating in an election or, you know, watching what happens in D.C. But we're doing it every day in our homes when we do these things that governments want us to do. Even as Kathleen mentions, we don't feel like we're doing something political. And I think that's one of the, the big lessons that governing happens in these very mundane ways in our day to day

lives. And so you can say—and I have a lot of people say—"I don't care about politics, I don't like politics." I'm like, well, "You're participating in it whether you want to or not," right?

JVN [00:49:06] Ah! So don't tap out!

PATRICIA STRACH [00:49:07] Yeah, it's right here. It's right here. And if you don't like what government's doing in terms of garbage and what you have to do and rats running around New York City, but you're participating in it. And if you don't like the fact that, you know, you, you can't drink your own water. Right? We are all participating in that, too. And so those are the kinds of things that we're doing politics, whether we think we are or not.

JVN [00:49:30] So I think this, like, may have been one of our very first episodes with, like, co-writers. So, like, what drew you both to this subject and, like, how did you guys get together and be like, "We want to do this, talk about the history of garbage collection and, like, how are we going to research it?" Because I also was reading that you guys research for this in the middle, I think, throughout the pandemic, so, like, how did you all do that, and come together to do this?

PATRICIA STRACH [00:49:53] Kathleen and I have been working together for a very long time, and we're a little bit different as political scientists because we're less interested in, like, "Oh, here's a member of Congress, let's study that. Here's a law that's being passed at the national level. Let's study that." And we're really interested in this basic question: How does a government solve a problem? What resources does it used to solve that problem? And we just throw the doors open to say, "We're going to look at whatever it does," and we're not going to focus on officials and agencies and rules which are important and come into our story. But we're also going to look at kind of the informal things that governments use, things like corruption, things like race, things like gender. And then, you know, we both wrote books on family. So there is a kind of this public-private divide where there's things on the table the government does and there's certain things off the table. It's all on the table. And governments will use whatever they can to accomplish their objectives. So that's how we got involved in this particular study. And Kathleen can talk about how we actually researched it.

KATHLEEN SULLIVAN [00:50:59] Yeah, sure. And I should mention, too, that Patty's research area is in more contemporary public policy theories and data. And my research area tends to be more 19th century law and archival research. So we actually really brought different strengths and perspectives to bear, which is why we worked together. But we've worked together really well, too. And so to research this, we actually started with those sanitarians. In addition to trying to solve problems, the sanitarians compiled just thousands of pages of research. They compiled so much data. So we borrowed their data to first understand, like, what the kind of lay of the land was. And then Patty and I together traveled to archives across the country. We went to New Orleans, Pittsburgh, San Francisco, Charleston, St. Louis, and we would look through city records. We would find the kind of reports and correspondence of civic organizations. So we were looking at government documents, but also some of these

civic associations in these cities. And then we compiled our own thousands of pages of material and spent years processing and organizing it, writing a draft, sending it to the other one, rewriting back and forth, back and forth.

JVN [00:52:21] Ah, honey! It's giving me Erin Brockovich when she goes to the water department and she's, like, making the whole thing in the back room, and she's, like, making the copies. And you guys are giving me movie montage, like, co-writing realness. I'm obsessed. Yeah. So what do you hope people will take away from this story of trash collection?

PATRICIA STRACH [00:52:39] I think we hope that people think about, like, "Isn't it amazing that we all take out our trash on a given day in the given receptacle at the given time? And we never think about politics when we do that." So one of the big take home lessons of this book is that, you know, this was once so controversial, it brought down governments and now we do it out of a habit that we don't even think about anymore. And even if you don't, like, you know, what your what your city government is doing to recognize the power that governments exert and how they exert it, how they get us to do things that we might otherwise not do, putting our trash out, getting vaccinated, all these public health measures that happened in the 19th century, that really changed the quality of life in the United States. We live a lot longer. We have a lot better lives because of it.

JVN [00:53:35] Kathleen, same question for you. What do you hope the people will take away from this story of trash collection?

KATHLEEN SULLIVAN [00:53:41] Well, you know, thinking about how riled up people got about COVID lockdowns and vaccinations, thinking government was tyrannical, Patty and I were like, "No, this is just what governments do!" Sometimes you feel the power of government and it feels like it's tyrannical. But when government is operating for the public good, it has to use power. It has to use power to get us to do things that we might not otherwise do. It doesn't mean that that's illegitimate authority. There is a authority for governments to protect the public health and to pursue the public good." But when they start doing something new, it, it feels it feels wrong. Just like people having to use a trash can felt inappropriate. Some people thought getting a COVID vaccination felt inappropriate, but actually it just feels wrong because it's new. It doesn't mean that government can't do that. And so we need to get used to this new way of doing things. It just kind of laid transparent the relationship between a government and its citizens.

JVN [00:54:46] Yeah. Fuck me. It's like we ended how we started. I feel like I learned so much. I am so grateful for both of you for coming on the podcast. Thank you so much, Patricia. Thank you so much, Kathleen, for your work and the scholarship and your time. Thank you, guys, so, so much.

KATHLEEN SULLIVAN [00:55:03] Thank you, Jonathan.

PATRICIA STRACH [00:55:04] It was a pleasure speaking with you.

JVN [00:55:10] You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. My guests this week were Kathleen Sullivan + Patricia Strach. You'll find links to their work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on. Our theme music is "Freak" by Quiñ - thank you so much to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, introduce a friend - show them how to subscribe. You can follow us on Instagram & Twitter @CuriousWithJVN, for more on what we're doing, for more on what our past guests are doing, other news stories we're watching, we love it over on @CuriousWithJVN. Our editor is Andrew Carson. Getting Curious is produced by me, Erica Getto, and Zahra Crim.