Professors Julian Zelizer (left) and Sam Wang record the weekly podcast *Politics and Polls* at the University's broadcast studio.

PHOTO BY EGAN JIMENEZ

Historian and neuroscientist team up for podcast

WHEN history professor Julian Zelizer and neuroscientist Sam Wang started the podcast *Politics and Polls* prior to last year's presidential election, they never dreamed it would still be going a year later. "We thought there wouldn't be much to talk about after Hillary won," Zelizer said.

Instead, the pair found themselves with plenty of new ground to cover. And Wang, who'd boasted on Twitter that he would eat a bug if Donald Trump won, found himself swallowing a cricket on national television.

Fast-forward to the present, and Zelizer and Wang continue to record weekly interviews with guests ranging from renowned journalists and politicians to playwrights. The podcast has become an influential source of commentary and analysis for policymakers, journalists and the public. In the past year it has been downloaded 170,000 times on iTunes and it is ranked in the top 20 for political podcasts.

The discussion resembles a dinner table conversation among friends trying to make sense of the political world around them. The hosts contemplate unfolding events such as the Trump-Russia story, or discuss the impact of gerrymandering on elections. Or they may talk about immigration with an expert in that field, or debate Brexit's parallels to U.S. events.

Zelizer, who is also a commentator on CNN, said his background as a historian provides perspective on Trump's victory. "I don't tend to see partisanship as a product of 2017 as much as a product of 30 years of change in American politics, whose players I have been following closely," said Zelizer, the Malcolm Stevenson Forbes, Class of 1941 Professor of History and Public Affairs in the Woodrow Wilson School for Public and International Affairs. "At the same time, I'm sensitive to the way in which

certain individuals can make a huge difference in key moments, in ways that historical data may not be able to predict."

The use of data to predict election outcomes is one of the areas of expertise that Wang, a professor of molecular biology and the Princeton Neuroscience Institute, brings to the podcast. In 2004, he started the Princeton Election Consortium, a blog that analyzes and predicts the outcomes of U.S. elections using polling data. While he stands behind statistical methods, he admits that the outcomes of the 2016 presidential election taught some new lessons.

"In news coverage and polling, there is this naive view that the way to find out what people think is to ask them," he said. But many people don't feel comfortable revealing information, he said, and it is useful to augment polling with information from people's online searches, social media posts and other behaviors.

The podcast is produced by the Woodrow Wilson School. Additional research for each week's episode is conducted by undergraduate Sophie Helmers, Class of 2019, who provides background information on speakers and possible questions to ask.

As to the future direction of the podcast, Wang and Zelizer haven't a clue — and they want to keep it that way. "I think it's a virtue that there is no grand strategy for where this goes," Zelizer said. "The election was so dramatic that it gave us an endless number of topics to talk about, and who knows what is going to happen next." **–By Yasemin Saplakoglu**

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