

Tanya Domi: Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to the Thought Project recorded at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences, and sciences. In this space we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas, generating, cutting edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.

Tanya Domi: This week's guest is distinguished professor John Mollenkopf, a member of the Political Science and Sociology faculties at The Graduate Center, CUNY. Professor Mollenkopf coordinates its interdisciplinary concentration in public policy and urban studies. He has authored or edited 15 books on urban politics, urban policy, immigration, and New York City. Professor Mollenkopf is director of the Center for Urban Research at The Graduate Center. Welcome to the thought project professor Mollenkopf.

John Mollenkopf: Thanks for inviting me.

Tanya Domi: It's great to have you here. This year we have an interesting situation with the presidential race. We have a crop of Democratic candidates that includes two current serving mayors and one former mayor. Pete Buttigieg is the mayor of South Bend, Indiana, currently serving as well as New York city's mayor, Bill De Blasio.

Tanya Domi: This seems to be the year of the mayor, where day to day effective governing is key to people's quality of life. Many people argue, especially in your profession and also analysts that really the real governance is happening at city and state level. Are you surprised by the number of mayors that are running this year for president? Can you recall another time when so many candidates that happened to have been a mayor or currently a mayor running for president?

John Mollenkopf: Yes and no. I am surprised by how many mayoral background people there are in the race and I also cannot remember another time when so many people were prominent. I'm not sure you can say all the mayors are equally prominent in this race, but it's remarkable to have three of them.

Tanya Domi: It's true. Do you think it says something about... Well, some of them have aspirations, clearly Buttigieg is a new generation of a candidate coming from the millennials. He is mayor of a small town in Indiana. I'm from Indiana. I'm familiar with South Bend. I questioned whether or not a city of a 102,000 people, which is maybe like two blocks in Manhattan is really qualifying someone to be president of the United States.

Tanya Domi: But nonetheless, the mayor of New York City is running for president. The largest municipality in the country a \$92 billion budget. Considered a national office in that it is so prominent. New York city is a culture capital, it's a media capital, it's a finance capital to be mayor of this city is a pretty significant office to hold.

John Mollenkopf: No doubt about it and people call it the second most important job or most difficult job politically in the country. It is in a lot of ways and you're right that mayor's really are where the services are delivered, where the worst conflicts breakout, where the toughest problems to manage are.

John Mollenkopf: Every other level of government above cities are some political scientists have called them banker governments. Because they're really in the business of setting frameworks and doling out money rather than actually operating services. That's a little bit different for the state. The state operates the state university system and there are some other state functions, but they're really pretty secondary compared to what...

John Mollenkopf: Across the country, governors are secondary to what happens at the municipal level, but the municipal level, the city level, even the big city level has never been a really good launching pad to higher office. Although Gavin Newsom in California could arguably be a little bit of a counter evidence on that point.

John Mollenkopf: Cory Booker also, well he became a Senator based on his mayoralty of Newark. It isn't that no one can ever rise, but the odds basically have been pretty bad against mayors achieving higher office across the country.

Tanya Domi: Yeah, it seems that only a few people have been elected president from a mayor's position and here in New York City, DeWitt Clinton in 1812 lost to incumbent James Madison becoming the first and last politician to vie for the white house directly from city hall. That's quite a historical mark, is it not?

John Mollenkopf: Yes. And it was a completely different world in so many ways in 1812.

Tanya Domi: Absolutely. You're talking about pre-civil war. So this is a big platform to be New York City mayor. This is a job that is a global capital headquarters.

John Mollenkopf: I've had a couple thoughts about why-

Tanya Domi: Yeah, I wanted to get to that.

John Mollenkopf: What the barriers are.

Tanya Domi: What are the barriers?

John Mollenkopf: Well, I draw two right off the top. One is that if you're mayor, especially for a couple of terms, you've managed to respond positively to a few of your constituents and probably make many more constituents angry because you either didn't do what they wanted or you couldn't do what they wanted. So-

Tanya Domi: Or you failed to do what maybe you promised

John Mollenkopf: That too. So I think mayors over the course of two or three terms collect aggrieved constituencies and-

Tanya Domi: Disappointment.

John Mollenkopf: ... disappointment. It's almost inherent in the job. The other thing is that the constituencies that support national elections often have interests before state governments in Congress, but much less in front of city governments. So, city governments are important for public employees who deliver basic services. They're important for contracts or real estate development, land regulation and so forth.

John Mollenkopf: But things like state highway construction or running health systems or financing higher education. These types of issues are almost always state level issues and not really city issues. The organized interests that might play real strong role in financing and supporting presidential candidates are generally more attuned to working at the state and congressional level than they are at the city level.

Tanya Domi: The city level. Although New York City is an exception to some of those criteria. I mean, you do have the hybrid of the City University of New York, which it's partly supported by the city. Secondly, the mayor's now touting the fact that New York City has healthcare insurance for New York residents.

John Mollenkopf: I think there are a lot of things that Bill De Blasio can be proud of. And would make a very legitimate set of issues to talk about in a presidential race.

Tanya Domi: In a presidential race. So why is he struggling then?

John Mollenkopf: I think he's struggling because if I were advising him, which I'm not. I would have said your job is to inject issues of big city inequality and policy innovation into the debate. Don't talk about yourself as really an odds on candidate to win a nomination. Because you know and everybody else knows that's unlikely to happen. So stick to principle, raise issues.

Tanya Domi: Try to create a debate about the issues you were elected on.

John Mollenkopf: Even with him in the race, I don't think there's a lot of discussion about what the challenges are facing big metropolitan areas or metropolitan areas generally in the United States, obviously healthcare and so on.

Tanya Domi: Housing.

John Mollenkopf: Well, there isn't even much debate about housing than I can detect in the presidential campaigning that's going on among Democrats.

Tanya Domi: No, I'm saying that should be perhaps-

John Mollenkopf: That could be. I mean-

Tanya Domi: ... an issue for discussion and debate.

John Mollenkopf: The rent squeeze and housing costs squeeze, is pervasive across America.

Tanya Domi: There's a national shortfall on housing in general, but also for seniors, like seniors are losing their houses because they can't pay taxes and they go through a transition period. You're talking about in terms of their aging process and they may need higher levels of assistance in housing. You're talking about the largest generation in US history is now retiring. Huge numbers every day. You know this.

John Mollenkopf: Part of the leading edge of the baby boomers, I'm very aware of this.

Tanya Domi: I'm a baby boomer too.

John Mollenkopf: They're all kinds of interesting related issues. Immigration for example, has been framed by the president as a sort of racial cleavage issue. But if it weren't for immigrants, we would be aging as a society even faster than we are. Immigrants both provide many of the care workers that older people need.

Tanya Domi: Absolutely.

John Mollenkopf: They also-

Tanya Domi: Work in the service industries, right?

John Mollenkopf: They are going to be the people that buy the houses if and when the baby boom passes from the scene and then we will sooner or later I guess. There has to be demand from the next generation and the next generation is largely immigrant and we have every incentive as a country to make sure their upward progress is as strong as possible instead of just castigating them and negatively stereotype them [crosstalk 00:10:21] the person-

Tanya Domi: Here's the issue of immigration and I know the mayor has really brought it up and he says, "We have a completely different position from the president of the United States." But here is New York City, the city of where original immigration came through Ellis Island.

Tanya Domi: This city government offers free legal services to immigrants. It has commissioner for immigration. It is a huge city that has one in three as one of

our colleagues Nancy Foner has written. One in three new Yorkers is either an immigrant or the child of an immigrant.

John Mollenkopf: Oh, it's way more than that.

Tanya Domi: It's way more than that.

John Mollenkopf: It's well above half at this point.

Tanya Domi: Okay. So maybe the data has shifted.

John Mollenkopf: About 38% of the city's residents are foreign born.

Tanya Domi: So this is an issue that I think the mayor could make more prominent.

John Mollenkopf: Absolutely.

Tanya Domi: But he hasn't. Isn't that interesting?

John Mollenkopf: It is interesting. And you would think, given that... I don't think anybody, even his closest advisors would have said when he launched out into the field. That you have a high likelihood of winning this nomination. So why not just force home the issues that you really care about that other people aren't paying attention to? That's something that he could contribute very distinctively to the national conversation that's going on.

Tanya Domi: Do you think that Cory Booker or Pete Buttigieg has brought issues into the race that we haven't heard from others? Because they were our mayor and were a mayor.

John Mollenkopf: Well, in Cory Booker's case, he was pretty pro-charter and he attracted a lot of attention from Wall Street, sort of conservative reformer types who don't like public education, K-12. He has not talked about that very much for obvious political reasons because the teacher's unions are very powerful forces in state and national presidential politics.

John Mollenkopf: I'm not sure just what Cory Booker has said that it's distinctively urban or reflects the newer experience. But some of the things that he might be tempted to say might not be politically serving him all that well at the moment. Buttigieg is really interesting character and not so much because he's the mayor of somewhat... Well, for Indiana it's probably a fairly large town.

Tanya Domi: It's the fourth largest.

John Mollenkopf: I grew up in Cincinnati so it's not too far away.

Tanya Domi: You're a neighbor. You're neighbor.

John Mollenkopf: He's a vet. He's extremely well educated. He speaks a number of languages. He's gay. He's been a very effective administrator. He's the member of a younger generation. I think that he serves himself extremely well by going out there and just making himself known to so many audiences.

Tanya Domi: He's raising his sensibility. Definitely.

John Mollenkopf: For somebody from... Again, such an improbable background, he's done extremely well in terms of raising money and getting known and having interesting things to say.

Tanya Domi: Yes, I mean he's the new generation and he's making a... I agree with you. I think he's been very effective. His media profile is pretty remarkable and that's been managed by another New Yorker, Lis Smith who's got the history of being a political operative here in New York state.

Tanya Domi: It's an interesting situation in that there's a number of candidates running. One of the phenomenon that when we talk about cities is we're talking about the exurbs now. The growth of cities into the suburbs and there's a political convergence happening between cities in the urban areas that could be a formidable voting block in the upcoming presidential election. What do you think about that? New York is a fairly blue state, so.

John Mollenkopf: Every big city or even moderately sized city is a lot more Democratic than the suburbs or the surrounding exurbs. So there's a kind of blue to red shift as you go from the central business district to the farthest suburbs. But that intermediate zone in the inner suburbs and middle suburbs has been changing tremendously over the past 15 years.

John Mollenkopf: Now, more than half the immigrants in the United States live outside of central cities in the suburbs. If you look at Northeast of Atlanta for example, or that so-called ethnoburb outside of the city of Los Angeles and LA County or Edison, New Jersey all over the place. The suburbs have become much more diverse in terms of their racial and nativity backgrounds of the people there.

John Mollenkopf: Now, poor people are also more likely to live outside of central cities than inside them. So poverty, we have always thought of as being an urban issue. Obviously, it still is. But so many cities have experienced such strong real estate markets that people are being displaced into the old working class suburbs around the big central cities that have less capacity to help them with their problems and less experience with them.

John Mollenkopf: So I think actually some sort of new metropolitan political agenda and policy agenda could be very helpful in bridging the gaps between the very blue central cities and the-

Tanya Domi: The-

John Mollenkopf: ... changing toward blue suburbs.

Tanya Domi: Very interesting. When you think about some of the problems that people are experiencing across the country. One that comes to mind quite readily is the opioid crisis. Where you're looking at people all across the country, particularly in Ohio and in the outskirts of some of the Midwest states outside of the cities. It's a huge health crisis.

John Mollenkopf: Right. It cuts across classes. But I think the despair is particularly strong in declining small town-

Tanya Domi: West Virginia.

John Mollenkopf: ... working class-

Tanya Domi: Yeah, working class.

John Mollenkopf: ... suburbs America. With two colleagues, I wrote a book called Place Matters. Where we try to lay out how the metropolitan areas are changing and what kinds of policies and programs would be kind of forward looking in that environment. We've done three editions of it and I'm sorry to say that what we've recommended in the book has not been widely adopted and has not dramatically changed the situation.

John Mollenkopf: In some ways the situation has gotten worse, especially with president Trump. I would say he has an outer upper-class suburban agenda and an anti-urban agenda. He is gained followers by exacerbating racial and other cleavages. It's a little bit like what was happening in central cities in the 1960s as they were starting to change racially. We got a whole set of politicians like Louise Day Hicks or Rizzo in Philadelphia-

Tanya Domi: [crosstalk 00:18:20] so right.

John Mollenkopf: ... sort of white working class backlash. The big cities are way beyond that now. But the ex-urban and the middle to far suburban America isn't.

Tanya Domi: There's disgruntlement and there's grievance, right?

John Mollenkopf: Yeah. So I think what Trump has done as a sort of short term winner. It's a longterm loser. But there's still going to be a very difficult period while the country as a whole gets used to the changes that is going through.

Tanya Domi: He's made it quite obvious like in his attacks on Baltimore city. Very racist and using terms like infestation. It's pretty grotesque rhetoric.

John Mollenkopf: It's also totally hypocritical in that he's plenty willing to exploit undocumented workers in his golf courses or whatever.

Tanya Domi: Yes, it's been exposed in New Jersey for example, on his property there. So your book about Place Matters and you're talking about this outgrowth from urban areas into the exurb and beyond. Would seem to me that would make a case for a mayor to be successful in this presidential run giving all what they do in terms of delivering services to people.

John Mollenkopf: I'd say yes and no. They represent the central city constituency. There has historically been some antagonism between suburbs and central cities.

Tanya Domi: Of course.

John Mollenkopf: Go to suburbs to get away from-

Tanya Domi: To get away from the city's problems.

John Mollenkopf: So the mayors tend to be associated with all the negative things that are going on in cities, whether or not they're responsible for them at all. So, and we don't have any metropolitan governments, so we don't have any metropolitan mayors who've dealt in a sort of bridge-

Tanya Domi: Bridge that.

John Mollenkopf: ... in their daily politics to run for office.

Tanya Domi: I would say Indianapolis might be an exception there.

John Mollenkopf: Yeah, they're. Yes.

Tanya Domi: Unigov which was instituted by Richard Lugar. It was during my time in high school.

John Mollenkopf: Louisville. There's a few cities that are-

Tanya Domi: That do that.

John Mollenkopf: More metropolitan.

Tanya Domi: That have done that. Yeah. So in terms of your book Place Matters, give us some major takeaways that you and your co-authors recommended that you think it's lamentable that they haven't been adopted.

John Mollenkopf: Well, one thing we proposed was a mobility strategy to allow people to move from very poor racially concentrated inner city neighborhoods to more suburban settings. For example, to make section 8 voucher much more portable on a regional basis than they have been in the past.

John Mollenkopf: We argue that mobility people-based strategies and place-based strategies are not alternatives. They can be complimentary. So that you would continue to build up places and increase their capacity to deal with various different problems. While at the same time fostering mobility and basically trying to break down segregation that way. Class segregation as well as-

Tanya Domi: As racial.

John Mollenkopf: ... as racial segregation. On the political front, I've had a lot of experience redistricting city council seats in New York City. So I know how the process works and I'm familiar with all the Republican redistrictings that have taken place across the country. Which basically amount to try to pack as many Democrats-

Tanya Domi: In to a fewer seats, right?

John Mollenkopf: In to fewer seats. I wrote the chapter about this in the book, sort of slicing cities up more as slices of a pie that would extend from the center of the city out into the suburbs. So you would have more officials who served both in urban and a suburban constituency and would in their daily politics bridge the political gap that we were talking about a minute ago.

Tanya Domi: Sure.

John Mollenkopf: But of course that hasn't happened. Also Democrats are not that interested in having more competitive districts, even if it would increase the total number of Democrats in the legislature.

Tanya Domi: Right. They're happy with what they have. Right. Let's just touch on New York state though for a minute. Now, we have a Democratic majority in the Senate, maintain control of the assembly this past year. You've seen a number of-

John Mollenkopf: Landmark legislation.

Tanya Domi: ... landmark legislation. It was a banner year for New York state-

John Mollenkopf: It certainly was.

Tanya Domi: ... was it not?

John Mollenkopf: Absolutely. California also has done a lot of really impressive things under similar circumstances. So I think New York and California are-

Tanya Domi: Leaning forward here.

John Mollenkopf: ... leaning forward. That's a good way of putting. I'm not sure we're totally out in front. There may be more progressive states. But we're headed in the right direction.

Tanya Domi: It does seem to... Just a quick note on Tish James she is really leaning forward is she not?

John Mollenkopf: Well, let's see if she can get the president's tax returns. That will be a great day if it happens.

Tanya Domi: Listen, I think professor Mollenkopf, the presidential candidates would do well by taking your advice and probably reading your book. I want to thank you for being here today.

John Mollenkopf: A great pleasure.

Tanya Domi: Thanks for tuning into the Thought Project and thanks to today's guest, distinguished professor John Mollenkopf of The Graduate Center, CUNY. The Thought Project is brought to you with production, engineering, and technical assistance by Kevin Wolf of CUNY TV. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.