

## Postdoc Profile: Dr. Marcus Johnson

University of Maryland (B.A. Government and Politics, Spanish); Princeton University (M.A., Comparative Politics; Ph.D. in Politics, joint degree in social policy)

### Faculty Mentor: Ernesto Calvo

Marcus Johnson has always had a keen interest in politics. But the impetus of his dissertation topic came when a stranger took his picture on the street. It was during graduate school, and Marcus, who is African American, was conducting fieldwork on immigration in rural Mexico; he quickly realized he was an oddity in a sea of homogeneity. “I never felt so ‘othered’ in my life,” he said. “Here I am, this tall black man speaking Spanish, but with an accent that clearly wasn’t from Mexico, and people just didn’t know what to make of me.” People stared, and pointed; and then there were the pictures. “After the reception I received in Mexico, I started to wonder, ‘are there black people in Latin America?’ I didn’t know. I did some reading and found that there is a huge afro population in Latin America. In Central America, estimates put it at about one-third.” And while Marcus found ample literature on the social movements of blacks in Latin America, discussions of their engagement in electoral politics was virtually non-existent. “It made me wonder why, and if there is a politics of race similar to the U.S.” Marcus pursued the topic, eventually writing his dissertation on the electoral politics of Panama.



Now a Presidential Postdoctoral Fellow, Marcus, who also completed his undergraduate degree at UMD, is witnessing his education come full circle. Below, he talks about the inspiration of good writing, race in politics, and coming home again:

Why did you choose UMD for your postdoc experience?

One of the main reasons that I chose Maryland was that it was like coming home; a lot of the faculty that mentored me [during my undergrad] are still here and they’ve continued to fill the program with so much star power, like my mentor Ernesto Calvo, whose work I became familiar with during graduate school. It was really exciting when I found out I had the opportunity to come back.

Your research examines methods used to perpetuate black marginalization and inactivity in politics, using specific case studies in Panama. What’s the story you hope to tell through your work?

I chose Panama because it was the place that looked most like the U.S. The U.S. was there for 100 years; they had Jim Crow segregation in the canal zone, so in a lot of ways, the institutions were similar to what we see in the U.S. south. But, when I got to Panama and began asking people questions that I took from American surveys of race, they looked at me like I had two heads. They

had no idea how to answer the questions, because the language wasn't familiar. The main story that I'm trying to tell is that over time, blackness has been incorporated into the large melting pot of who Panama and Central American are as nations, but so much so that it's taken away the ability for these groups to claim distinctive experiences and the need for distinctive politics.

Marginalization of blacks and minority communities is a predominating topic in U.S. politics, particularly in this past election. Did you see parallels in Panama? How did it differ?

The use of explicit language does not exist in Latin America like it does in the U.S. Here in the U.S., we've been socialized into a discourse of race, especially for marginalized groups; we're looking for ways in which structural oppression operates. That also happens in Latin America, but I think the electoral arena isn't where people are looking for it. In the U.S., we've had Willie Horton ads, and Trump—and everything in between. We look for race in electoral politics in a way that parties haven't explicitly activated race in Panama, especially in recent decades. But what I do see that is similar are the institutional blocks and mechanisms in voting, such as vote buying; the process of candidates or their representatives showing up in communities and offering cash in exchange for a promise of voting, or not voting, or renting someone's ID card so they can't show up to the polls. What I find is that there is a disproportionate mobilization of those tactics with people of darker skin color. It operates in a very similar way to the voting rights issue; it's not like there are laws that say black people can't vote, it's just that it's common that black and brown people don't have the identification to the same degree as white people do. And what's jarring is that in all of my interviews, the overwhelming response was that it's just not appropriate to think about race when you vote.

How do you hope your work will impact others?

I care deeply about race politics in the Americas. As an academic, and especially as a comparatist in political science, the push is always to think about how your theory can speak to broader phenomena. Right now, I think the biggest punch of my work is the idea of political discrimination, which backs away from this idea that racism and discrimination requires explicit intent on the part of people in power to be racist. It's much harder to call it racism when institutions themselves are already stratified, if they play on wealth and inequality; my argument is that it creates a situation in which two groups that are otherwise the same are treated differently when it comes to exercising their constitutional right to suffrage. Thinking about race politics in a more institutional sense—especially in Latin America—and connecting that to what we know about institutional racism in the U.S. is the impact I'd like to make in scholarship. In addition, I spent about 11 months in Panama and developed some great relationships with the electoral tribunal, with afro-social civic leaders, and just people in the community. I want to make sure that in some way I can give back to my interlocutors, and that my work does more than just diagnose problems; that it's part of the conversation.

You have been incredibly active in community service during your academic career, no small task for someone pursuing graduate-level degrees. Why is community service important to you? Do you

have plans to continue those efforts in College Park?

There are a lot of reasons why I got involved in community service. I think there was always this feeling that work is cool, but not very fulfilling, especially when who I'm writing for is typically not who I'm writing about. I volunteered at the prison teaching initiative for about two years and it was really eye-opening. I think it was a quick way to feel like what I'd done made an impact. But, thinking about the long game, the role that prisons serve institutionally and socially, I became uncomfortable being a cog in that wheel. I'm still trying to think about how I can get back into that in a way that's productive. In the meantime, I'm looking at the candidates for Maryland governor - so I think my next project will be volunteering for Ben Jealous' campaign, he's the candidate I'm most aligned with.

What's the last great book you read or show you binged?

I read all of the Game of Thrones books, but the books stopped at a place where I knew the show had already advanced, so I binged through the entire series in about seven or eight weeks. I actually felt like the show got so much better when it left the books; I think George R.R. Martin has sort of written himself into a hole! But more than watching T.V., I make a lot of time to read. The last good book I read was Tar Baby by Toni Morrison and I love the way that she writes. While I'm writing something that is not at all in that genre, it still inspires me to want to write in a way that's engaging.

Article by Maggie Haslam

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## Appointments and Promotions

The Office of Faculty Affairs is pleased to report that over 100 PTK faculty members have been promoted using the department, college, and campus-level policies created since the approval of Senate Bill [14-15-09](#), which provides a framework for recognizing the accomplishments of PTK faculty members. For an overview of campus procedures for [PTK promotions](#), see the PTK Promotions section of the [Faculty Handbook](#). Questions about departmental PTK policies are best directed to department chairs (or center/institute directors), while questions about a given college's PTK policies are best addressed to that college's Associate Dean for Faculty. For questions about the new PTK promotion processes at the campus level, contact [Mark Arnold](#).

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## Recognition & Awards

### 2017-18 Distinguished Scholar-Teachers



### **Sandra Gordon-Salant**

On November 20, Dr. Gordon-Salant presented, "Golden Years, Golden Ears: The Challenges of Age-Related Hearing Loss" in Tawes Hall.

## **The Kirwan Awards**

Former University of Maryland President William E. Kirwan and Patricia H. Kirwan have established a fund to support two annual prizes:

- The **Kirwan Faculty Research and Scholarship Prize** recognizes a faculty member for a highly significant work of research, scholarship, or artistic creativity completed in the recent past. The prize can be awarded for a publication, an invention, a performance, or any other activity within the faculty member's academic discipline. All current full-time tenure-track or tenured faculty are eligible. The prize carries an honorarium of \$5000 and is awarded at the Fall Convocation. For more information, contact the Graduate School's Office of Fellowships and Awards, **Robyn Kotzker**, at (301) 405-0281. Nominations should be sent by email to [Kirwan-graduateprize@umd.edu](mailto:Kirwan-graduateprize@umd.edu). Nomination Deadline is Wednesday, February 28, 2018.
- The **Kirwan Undergraduate Education Award** recognizes faculty or staff who have made exceptional contributions to the quality of undergraduate education at the university. The prize carries an honorarium of \$5000 and is awarded at the Campus Convocation each fall. For more information, contact the Dean of Undergraduate Studies, **William Cohen** at (301) 405-9363. Nomination Deadline is Wednesday, February 28, 2018.

# Faculty Development



## University of Maryland Emeritus/Emerita Association

Emeriti gathered on Wednesday, December 6 for a presentation on "Intergenerational Communication and the Aging Workforce" given by Lindsey B. Anderson, Assistant Professor of Communication. The program covered the aging workforce and the impacts of intergenerational communication, retirement, and bridge employment.

## Faculty Tips and Resources





## **Cruel Student Comments: Seven Ways to Soothe the Sting**

By: Isis Artze-Vega EdD, Faculty Focus

Reading students' comments on official end-of-term evaluations—or worse, online at sites like RateMyProfessors.com—can be depressing, often even demoralizing. So it's understandable that some faculty look only at the quantitative ratings; others skim the written section; and many others have vowed to never again read the public online comments. It's simply too painful... [Read More](#)

## **News**

UMD and NASA Join Forces to Improve Global Food Security through Satellite Data

UMD Professor Receives \$1M from USDA NIFA to Increase Poultry Yield and Advance Animal Well-Being

Quantum Computing Moves Forward with Record Setting UMD-NIST 53 Qubit Quantum Simulator

UMD Joins Regional Leaders, Coalition of Stakeholders to Launch Pathways to Opportunity along Maryland's Purple Line

## **Five Advantages to Write More With a Writing Group**

By: Higher Ed Professor

Writing is hard. Whether you are a graduate student, pre-tenure faculty member, or a tenured full professor, the writing process often proves difficult. Yet, for many of us, writing represents some of the most important aspects of our professional work. One of the best ways that I have found to support my work is to write more with a writing group... [Read More](#)

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