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WHAT TO EXPECT FROM DONALD TRUMP'S  
FIRST STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESS

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## P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. DIONNE: I want to welcome everyone here today. I'm E.J. Dionne; I'm a senior fellow here at Brookings. And I want to begin by professing a profound bias about the events on Tuesday that's not the bias you're thinking of. The Democratic reply by Congressman Joe Kennedy will be given from Diamond Vocational School in Fall River, Massachusetts, which is my home town, and I'm very proud of that. Fall River is a proud but often economically battered factory town on the Long Island border. And I hope only good things come to Fall River from Tuesday night's events. So I just had to put that on the record.

I am also really honored to be moderating a panel with some very distinguished Brookings folks. This is Brookings and we will have a lot to say about policy, arguably it might be one of the only times this week we really hear about policy. But this presidency is, as we know, unusual. And I think that before we move to policy, which I promise we will, it's really important to talk about the political context of the speech. On my way down here I heard a news broadcast that began, and now we turn to the state of the investigation. And clearly Mr. Mueller's investigation rides over the news right now. President Trump has been running at 55-60 percent disapproval, there is an election in November, an important election. And so obviously States of the Union have policy purposes, but also political purposes.

I just want to go right down the panel to ask how they analyze that. But before I do I want to give a brief introduction to each of our panelists. I think you have long bios of all of them. They're very distinguished. This is the length of the average bio and I don't want to consume our entire discussion by describing how wonderful they are. So I will just say that Camille is the director of the Brookings Race, Prosperity, and Inclusion Initiative and a senior fellow in Governance Studies with affiliated appointments

in economic studies and metropolitan policy. John Hudak is deputy director of the Center for Effective Public Management and a senior fellow in Governance Studies. Molly Reynolds is a fellow in Governance Studies at Brookings and is a specialist on Congress. And Jon Valant is a fellow in the Brown Center on Education Policy at the Brookings Institution. He focuses on K-12 education policy and politics.

So first let's just go to the political context. What do you think will come out of this politically, what does Trump to do, and if anybody wants to comment, what does Joe Kennedy need to do as well? He's giving I think the hardest speech any politician is ever asked to give. The reply to the State of the Union is almost always panned, fairly or unfairly. So I guess that's the good news for him is the bar is low, the bad news is that the history is not good for that speech.

Well, let's mostly focus on Trump. Please.

MS. BUSETTE: Well, thanks E.J., and thank you all for coming today. It's a wonderful change to opine a little bit about what we think is going to be happening tomorrow night.

So, the context. Obviously the Mueller investigation has been a tremendous cloud over almost all of the president's policy agenda. And of course that's going to continue and of course we don't expect him to say much about the Mueller investigation. But what I do think is interesting about having that context is that it has provided an opportunity for Democrats in a couple of different ways. One is it has -- the Mueller investigation has created a level of tension with Congress that I think is highly unusual because the president is of the same party as the congressional leadership and yet there is a fair amount of tension there. Secondly, because of the way the Mueller investigation has overshadowed the president's policy agenda it also has created an opportunity for Democrats to start talking about their policy agenda in a way that I think

might not have happened had he not been confronted with the Mueller investigation.

So I'll stop there.

MR. DIONNE: John?

MR. HUDAK: So quickly, I think what the president and what Representative Kennedy need to do actually is something quite similar, and that is talk about who they are not. The president needs to look out at an audience and not talk about someone who's divisive, not talk about someone who is under multiple investigations, not talk about someone who has had trouble articulating a viewpoint on a variety of areas of policy, particularly over the past few weeks. He needs to think about the broader American electorate with whom he has had a struggle in his first year connecting with. He needs to essentially step away from the president that he has been over the past year and think about the president who he wants to be for the next three. And that's going to be someone with different rhetoric, different ideas, and a different approach with regard to how he works across the aisle but also within his own party.

And in a lot of ways Representative Kennedy has the same task in one very important sense. And I say this sensitive to white males with red hair, but he is not speaking to white males tomorrow night. His party does not want to hear a white male perspective. They want to hear what he is going to do for women's rights and for policies that affect women disproportionately, they want to hear about he'll do for race relations within the African-American community. They're looking to hear what he's going to do for dreamers and for other immigrants from a variety of countries around the world. And while I think the optics of Representative Kennedy giving the Democratic response is actually quite poor, particularly with the last name that he has, I think he has an opportunity to show what the Democratic Party stands for even if you optically are not necessarily what the Democratic Party is looking for.

MR. DIONNE: That's interesting. I want to follow up on that. Molly?

MS. REYNOLDS: Thanks, E.J. So I think to the extent that President Trump has a political problem right now, and E.J. mentioned his high disapproval ratings, it's not at all clear to me that anything he says or does tomorrow night is going to correct that over the long-term. So to the extent that we have evidence of what State of the Union addresses mean for public approval, sometimes the president gets a small bounce, but it rarely moves the needle significantly and it rarely does so for a long period of time. Its effects generally don't persist. And some of that is because over time the viewership of the State of the Union has become more partisan, so now people of the president's party are much more likely to watch the address, people who don't identify with the president's party are likely to turn on something else on a weeknight. So that means that not everyone is seeing the speech. And so I think that going forward, particularly into the congressional midterms in November, to the extent that they're watching presidential approval as a signal of what might happen, what happens tomorrow night really isn't going to change much for Trump.

MR. DIONNE: Thank you. I think viewership of NBA games will tilt very Democratic that night. (Laughter)

Go ahead.

MR. VALANT: So I'll mostly echo what Molly just said. So I think one of the lessons from the media response to last year's address to the Joint Session of Congress was that the bar is very low for the president when he's makes these kind of addresses. It's also not very difficult to look presidential on that stage. So I think tomorrow is mostly a matter of sort of staying on script, reading through the script, and looking friendly. The bigger challenge for the president will be in the couple of days that follow, to not step all over his own speech and sort of change the storyline.

Now, I think for the Democrats this is -- to John and Camille's points -- I think this is a chance to start to define an agenda in advance of the 2018 elections. So where Trump doesn't seem all that interested in talking policy specifics, this is sort of the first chance the Democrats have to sort of say this is who we are and this what we'll do, and to not look like they're just reacting to the news of the moment, but to start talking about education and healthcare and all of these issues on their own terms.

MR. DIONNE: Yes, this is -- I think that's a great point. John Hudak recently returned from giving a talk in Las Vegas and I think there will be two betting lines, one is if he simply reads from the script will he be praised widely as presidential, and the second betting line will be does he or does he not Tweet something quickly to shift the focus off the message of the speech. And it's going to be very interesting to watch.

Just before I turn to policy I wanted to pick up on what you said, John. I suppose coming from Fall River, Massachusetts, where the turnout slogan was often vote for the Kennedy of your choice, but vote (laughter) I was surprised to hear you say that Kennedy name is a negative for the Democrats. So just to pick up on two points you made, one is on Trump, I think you described his goals extremely well. The question is what's your sense of how long that can last, especially given Molly's point? And secondly, it seems to me Kennedy was picked precisely because in a way the Kennedy name symbolizes unity across the various wings of the Democratic Party, including African-Americans and Latinos, but he can also speak as he is from a white working class town, to non-wealthy whites. So I'm curious why you see him as a negative, which of course violates every sense of my hometown, but also your take on Trump.

MR. HUDAK: So with regard to how long Trump can remain a different kind of president, and that is the president who he projects tomorrow night. Obviously we

all, I think, naturally fall back on who we are naturally. And if you are putting on a costume on Halloween you're not going to wear that Halloween costume on November 1. And I think if the president puts on a costume tomorrow night it might look great and it might end up getting him some rave review, but ultimately Donald Trump is Donald Trump and that's what his base likes about him. His base will not like if he comes out as more traditional politician tomorrow night. And I think he'll hear that from Fox News, he will hear that from Breitbart, he will see that on Twitter, and that will push him back to the Donald Trump we've known for the past 53 weeks and not the Donald Trump who he might project in a 50 minute speech.

With regard to Representative Kennedy, it's absolutely true that the Kennedy brand has appeal in the Democratic Party. I think over the last year though we've seen significant powerfully vocal forces within the Democratic Party showing their disdain for dynasties, their disdain for the politics of tradition, and of a brand name overriding policy. And so while I think Representative Kennedy is right on policy in a lot of ways, I think the idea that you have the right last name and so you get to do what you want to do is something that is turning off a significant number of progressives in the United States. And even if he works hard at it there is still going to be this skeptical portion of the Democratic Party who is going to look at him and say that is not who we are anymore. Most people voting in this electorate did not fall in love with Jack Kennedy, they were not born when Jack Kennedy was alive. Jack Kennedy does not do for them what he does for Nancy Pelosi or Chuck Schumer or Bill Clinton. That is the old Democratic Party. The new Democratic Party, frankly doesn't give much of a damn about the Kennedys I think.

MR. DIONNE: That's very interesting. And I also think there is -- I've heard some pushback, a party that is sort of heavily African-American, heavily Latino, the

most loyal of constituents of the party have spoken of where is our representative. And I think that will be part of the conversation.

So, Camille, you can pick up on the politics if you'd like, but I also just want to ask, moving to policy, what do you expect to hear about the economy beyond the fact that we will hear that this is the greatest economy that's ever existed anywhere on any part of the world? What are we going to hear about the --

MS. BUSETTE: Or any galaxy.

MR. DIONNE: Yeah, that's true. The Mars economy has got nothing on us.

MS. BUSETTE: So obviously I expect him to talk about jobs and I expect him to talk about the health of the stock market. And I expect him to be very combative around trade. With respect to jobs, I think this is how he's going to frame it, I think he's going to talk a lot about the decreasing unemployment rate and he's going to tout that clearly as something that he can take credit for. Where I think he might miss the mark, and I think this is to the point that my colleagues have made, is I do not think he's going to take this opportunity to talk about the areas of the economy where jobs have not been produced or the people, the groups in the economy that have not been as fortunate in a growing economy as others. So, for instance, I don't think he's going to talk about the fact that even though the African-American unemployment rate at 6.8 percent is lower than it has been historically that it is considerably higher than the overall unemployment rate. He's not going to talk about the fact that Latino unemployment is also higher than the overall national unemployment rate. He's not going to talk about the fact that pockets of the United States, so, for instance, the Cleveland metro area where unemployment again is higher than it is overall for the national economy. And then again you will see that with people who have less than a high school degree again are -- there are 6.3



percent of those folks who are unemployed, 6.3 percent unemployment rate there, which means there again about 2 points above the national unemployment rate. So I don't expect him to talk about that, but I think that's actually going to be a real problem for him because this is really an opportunity for him to set himself up and the party up for the midterm elections. And the fact that the stock market is doing well, that the unemployment rate has come down, does not mean that there are still not pockets of people who are in distress. And we can see that also from other statistics, for instance, the opioid epidemic, which is actually growing. And there has been a lot of coverage of the kind of death and despair sections of the economy and of the populous. So I don't think he's going to focus on that.

The other part of the economy which I think another president might have focused on is the tension that has erupted around jobs and opportunities for women and what they have to do in order to make it in this economy. Another president might make some reference to the Me Too movement. He will not, for obvious reasons, but again I think that's a mistake. So in some ways I think he's going to frame the economic outlook as extremely rosy, maybe with the exception of trade, which of course he's going to be very -- I expect him to be quite contentious about, but he's going to frame it as pretty rosy and he's going to neglect those people who are going to be pretty central when we come to the November midterm elections.

MR. DIONNE: Thank you. John, I want you to build on what you've already said to talk about also how this speech is messaging for the midterms and what you think he'll be looking to do. And in particular I'd like you to talk about three issues that you know a lot about and care about, infrastructure and immigration, and I add marijuana, not because Jon has a deep personal interest in marijuana, but because he has a great professional interest in the subject having written a book called "Marijuana: A

Short History". But I'm not sure he's going to talk about that at all tonight, but I'd love to hear you on infrastructure and immigration.

MR. HUDAK: Sure. So the president needs to recognize that tomorrow night's speech is really the beginning of messaging for his party for 2018. In many ways the president goes it alone a variety of perspectives, not thinking clearly or strategically about what his words will mean for the party brand. But in a lot of ways the State of the Union in a midterm year is a way to frame what Republicans' message will be. Democrats get criticized quite a bit right now in the conversation around whether there will be a wave election, whether they'll take back the house, or what have you because they don't have a brand, they don't have a message, they don't have a unifying theme. But it's important to ask, what's the Republicans' unifying theme? Ignore his tweets? We passed a tax bill? That is not a message. But the president has the opportunity to create that message and craft that message that will then tell the senate committee and the house committee, this is how you need to run an election and this is how I will help you. Whether that will get through within the White House, it's hard to imagine that the president has the team around him who will be savvy enough to push that, but he could do it quite well. And if he can come up with that message, if he can work with the Congress to craft that message, it could be a powerfully political speech tomorrow night. Otherwise it will be a missed opportunity.

And the way the president does that is he talks about issues that average Americans care deeply about, not necessarily his base, but talking to the moderates who have now lost support for the president but who voted for him 14 months ago. It's important for him to think what does America care about when it comes to infrastructure. People are ready for shovel ready projects, people look around their communities at the infrastructure that exists and they don't smile about it, they see the

crumbling infrastructure and they want solutions to that. That's not a Democratic issue, that's not a Republican issue, that's an issue that unites Americans. And the president interestingly doesn't have to become a policy wonk to communicate with Americans about how to pay for it, what it will look like, how many jobs it will create. He can talk in very general ways, which he's actually quite good at, in terms of telling Americans this is what I want to do for you and this is what this government can do for you and I will promise that we'll do it in the next year. That's something a lot of Americans, not just his base, want to hear about.

And it's true for immigration policy too. The president is in a difficult position when it comes to immigration policy given the rabid views of his supporters versus the overwhelming views of most Americans when it comes to issues like DACA, when it comes to issues like border security, when it comes to issues like comprehensive immigration reform. But there is a needle to thread, there is a way to put out a comprehensive immigration reform plan that doesn't give everyone everything they want, but checks boxes off that people need. The average American wants that. Fox News might not, Breitbart might not, other right wing media might not, but that's not how the president gets reelected, that's not how Republicans hold the house. They need to communicate to more Americans. And finding these issues -- and as E.J. said, marijuana policy, absolutely not going to come up in the speech, but it is an issue that unites a lot of Americans, 64 percent of Americans support recreational marijuana reform in the United States, 90 percent of Americans, including 85 percent of veterans in this country, support medical marijuana reform. That's an issue the president won't touch with a 10 foot pole. And that's a mistake. That is one of those issues that he can talk about and people can think, you know what, that populist message through the campaign and the message in his inaugural speech about returning the power from insiders in Washington to the

people, that's real. He's talking about an issue that most presidents wouldn't talk about in a speech, marijuana reform, but we care about that, we support that, that's our kind of president. It might not be marijuana, it might not be infrastructure, but finding issues like that, looking like a different kind of president for touching issues that presidents wouldn't normally touch is something that MSNBC might end up hating but an out-of-work steelworker in Youngstown, Ohio is probably going to nod his head and say, yeah, I lost some faith in this guy over the past six months, but maybe I'll give him another try.

MR. DIONNE: Thank you. A lot to discuss there. Thank you so much.

Molly, can you talk about what the speech means for setting Congress' agenda, and specifically around the current immigration negotiations, the leaked plan, apparently the Steven Miller plan, was not exactly unifying and it looks like the Congress, at least the Senate, might go its own way in negotiating. So how can he influence the congressional agenda?

MS. REYNOLDS: So for me this is usually one of the most important functions of a State of the Union Address, which is to tell Congress what the president's priorities are, to say here are the set of issues that I as the president care about and that I want you to, Congress, to work on over the next year.

When we think about President Trump's time in office so far, from my perspective he's actually had a very thin legislative agenda. Most of what Congress did last year were not things that President Trump was pushing for, they were things that Republicans and Congress wanted to do that they had pledged they were going to work on, namely the ultimately failed attempt to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act and then the Republican tax bill that passed and was signed into law at the end of last year. So those are sort of conventional Republican ideas, they're not things that kind of we identify really strongly with President Trump. They're things that congressional

Republicans were pushing.

And so thinking about going forward into 2018 I think congressional Republicans actually could use some effort from President Trump to present them with a unifying agenda, particularly on immigration. And up to this point President Trump has not been terribly effective at doing that. So he's been -- if we start back in say September of 2017 he's been all over the map on what he's said publicly, what he's said privately about what he wants Congress to do. So we can start with when he announced that he was going to end the DACA program. He makes that deal, the tentative deal with Minority Leader Schumer and Minority Leader Pelosi, and then he backtracks on that. John Kelly says that Trump doesn't actually want a physical wall, Trump says, no, that's not true. I could go on and on about sort of how all over the place he's been in his public pronouncements on this. And so if I think we're going to see meaningful action on immigration, whether it's in the next several weeks before the next government funding impasse appears before Congress, on or before February 8, or over the months to follow, I think Congress, particularly Republicans, are actually looking for some leadership on the White House, and it's not from the White House and it's not exactly clear to me what that's going to look like or where it's going to come from.

On infrastructure, I think all reporting suggests that Trump will talk about infrastructure and his infrastructure plan in the speech tomorrow night. That plan is the mythical two weeks away. It's been that way for much of Trump's presidency, but we're starting to hear some more details of what it might look like. And one thing that will be very important for me to watch is to what degree does the infrastructure plan have the power to start creating some divisions within the Democratic Party? So one thing that we did not see a lot of during 2017, mainly because the Congress was pursuing these Republican policy goals on healthcare and taxes, was that allowed Democrats to stand

pretty unified in opposition to what Republicans were doing. We could have imagined a tax bill that might have divided some of the Democrats, particularly some of those Democrats from red states in the Senate who are running for reelection this fall, but that's not the tax plan we got. We got a tax plan that was very easy for democrats to oppose in a unified way.

On infrastructure, however, depending on what the infrastructure plan looks like, I could imagine that that might start to drive some wedges between the red state Democrats and the rest of the Democratic Party. At this point it sounds like it's going to be a small amount of federal investment that's really meant to drive a lot of private investment. I don't quite know how that will break down, but as we kind of think about what Congress is likely to do this year, which is frankly not a whole lot that they don't absolutely have to do, and they're going to have trouble doing the things they absolutely have to do because they've proven to be pretty bad at that recently. I think infrastructure is something we'll hear some conversation about and so it will be important to me to watch exactly what that message comes out as.

MR. DIONNE: Thank you. I want to turn to Jon on education, but I want to put a question out there for you guys to think about, which is (a) infrastructure -- Trump led with it early on, could have put the Democrats in a very difficult position and he didn't choose to -- because Democrats have been arguing for infrastructure spending forever -- he didn't choose to do that. And why -- I think the political context is now different. Secondly, if he does the spending light, tax incentive heavy infrastructure plan (a) I'm not sure how well that plays even with red state Democrats, and (b) that is more likely to drive money to prosperous states than it is to less well-off states. So I'd be curious how that plays. So I'll come back to that.

But, Jon, education is one of the most important things government at all

levels does for the country's future and for its economy, yet education arguments have not been central to our politics so far. If I could combine two questions, one, what do you expect to hear about education and what has Trump been up to in this area that really hasn't gotten much attention over the first year of his presidency?

MR. VALANT: Sure. So I'll say that I will be very surprised if on Wednesday morning we are all talking about education policy. I will be the happiest person in this room if that's the case (laughter), but I will be very surprised if that's the case. The favorite talking point on education of the president, and really a large part of the Republican Party, has been school choice. So that is policies that either give public money to families to spend on private schools or charter schools, which are kind of publicly governed schools that families can choose and that operate more autonomously. So the president, while he was campaigning he called himself the nation's biggest cheerleader for school choice, he selected an education secretary whose background really was sort of exclusively in school choice, he kind of vaguely pledged \$20 billion for some kind of choice program, and very little of that has materialized in the first year. And part of the reason for that is a pretty interesting tension in the Republican Party at the federal level when it comes to education governance, which is that the Republicans do have some policy priorities that they could get done at the federal level. So they care a lot about these school choice ideas, they care about accountability, so holding schools accountable for their performance. But really their top priority is to get the federal government out of education policy making. And so the president and Secretary DeVos have had plans that I think look to a lot of people like they were very likely to materialize, and then they sort of went nowhere. And they went nowhere amid quite a bit of pushback from other Republicans who said these are state and local issues and not federal issues and not federal issues.

So I would expect some discussion of school choice tomorrow night. I think it will be more rhetorical than any kind of particular policy proposal. What we have seen so far was an extension of 529 plans, so the plans that a lot of families use to save for college. They, as part of tax reform, they moved that down to K-12 too, which isn't a particularly coherent policy. Sort of the way that 529 plans work is when you let money sit long enough it accrues enough interest that then you have money to spend on college. That doesn't really work for K-12 when you're trying to cover kindergarten tuition a few years after you put money in. It's also not a very good plan for low income families because most families don't have a lot of money to throw into a 529 plan. So that plan hasn't been popular really with anyone, with Democrats, with Republicans, or really with anyone. So they haven't done very much. I think he'll probably speak a bit about it because he always speaks a little bit about school choice.

As far as other topics I think he'll touch on, I would expect to hear a little bit about deregulation. So deregulation has been a priority not just in education but sort of across all of the policy areas. They have done quite a bit to deregulate in education. They have pulled back on sexual assault on college campus guidance, which I don't think we'll hear much about that in particular, but they've sort of pulled back on teach preparation regulations, lots of different regulations, and they have more in the plans. So they're looking to deregulate for profit colleges and student discipline, and they have other plans there. I think we'll also hear a fair amount about higher education. The Higher Education Act, which governs the country's financial aid system, is up this year and there's a good chance that we see some movement on that. We also might see some movement on vocational and career education. So I think we'll see a bit there.

And then as far as what I hope to hear, if he's talking about school choice I hope that it is framed in terms of how we create opportunities for low income kids to



access schools that their families can't access. So there are kind of a couple of different ways of talking about school choice policy and thinking about it. One way is that even virtually every family in the country has some opportunity to choose schools because you can choose where you live and school choice policies can sort of extend that opportunity more broadly. Often that has not been the way that the Trump Administration has talked about school choice. It's sort of talked of it in terms of correcting the failures in the public school system, which I find sort of divisive and unhelpful and unclear about what that means for policy.

I also would be very surprised, but very happy if he makes any allusion to what we in kind of the education call the school to prison pipeline. So a very hot issue right now in education that hasn't really surfaced more broadly is the experiences that poor and minority students have with authority and with discipline in schools can often create lots of problems downstream. And the Obama Administration issued some guidance to schools about how to handle that and how to avoid discrimination in student punishment. The Trump Administration looks like it's poised to pull back on a lot of those guidelines, but we really don't know. They haven't told us much. So I would be very pleased to hear something positive on that, but I'm not expecting it.

MR. DIONNE: Just a quick question, in certain ways higher ed -- if you could elaborate a bit more -- in some ways the most important policy choices that Congress has made with Trump are in the tax bill, the taxing of the endowments of I guess the 30 largest endowments in the country. The tax bill might end up having the effect of reducing charitable contributions given the way the tax rates work. Could you talk a bit about that?

MR. VALANT: Sure. So there is an interesting political dynamic that is developing with higher education, which is we're starting to see a split in how sort of

interested and pleased and satisfied Americans are with higher education and institutions of higher education more generally. Republicans are growing more and more skeptical of just universities in the country. And some of that is rooted in concerns about free speech, which also is a topic that I think we might hear a little bit about tomorrow. But it looks bigger and broader than that. It looks like some of it is about skepticism that as many kids need college degrees as are currently getting them. And so it seems like the Administration is sort of making moves along those lines.

Having said that, I do think there actually is some room for some bipartisan work in areas like streamlining the FAFSA, the college financial aid application process, and the Perkins Act, which is kind of career and technical education, like vocational education. I think there's room for some bipartisan work, but it has been a very active area and I think it will continue to be a very active area.

MR. DIONNE: Thank you so much. I am really, by the way, very happy you mentioned deregulation. And we can't cover it all, but in some ways the biggest accomplishments of the Trump Administration, which are in the eyes of its critics obviously quite negative accomplishments on deregulation in the environmental area, what looks like the dismantling of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, other consumer protections, labor protections. This is a very big deal. And in a way I think the Administration has profited from doing these things largely under the radar as all these other stories have taken prominence. And education is one area where that's important.

We are going to turn shortly to the audience, so get your questions ready. I just want to pursue a couple of lines opened by my colleagues' excellent discussion. I want to put out a thought, which you can respond to and then I want to focus briefly on sort of a follow up on infrastructure, the thought is it would seem to me there will be two clear messages coming out of this. One is the economy is doing great

and it's because of our tax cut and now this is no longer the Obama economy it's our economy, Trump and the Republicans. And then the second message, I suspect it will be a little less direct, but it's well we're willing to compromise a little bit on immigration but basically we're tougher on immigration than those Democrats. The first message designed for broad appeal, the second message designed to keep the base activated. That's my hunch if any two obvious messages emerge from this.

But does anybody have any follow up on the infrastructure because it does seem to me, as Molly said, it's come in two weeks for the last fifty-three weeks. And a lot of Republicans don't actually want to spend that money, which is probably why the -- well, if we do it in the form of tax cuts it might have more traction. I'm just curious where any of you see that going.

Please, Camille.

MS. BUSETTE: I just wanted to comment on one thing that's not on infrastructure, but it's an omission that I think is going to occur in this speech around the economy, and that is about healthcare and the repeal of healthcare. I actually don't think he's going to say much about that. And that's a huge miss for him over the last year.

MS. REYNOLDS: So I expect he'll point out the fact that the Republicans' tax bill repealed the individual mandate. I think Republicans have been trying to get some traction with that as, you know, not necessarily a down payment on repealing the ACA, because like you I don't actually think that's likely to come back up this year. But I think that they're going to remind people that that happened. So I expect that he'll mention that, but I think more broadly. He may talk again in sort of the deregulatory space about some regulations that they're trying to roll back.

But on your infrastructure question, E.J., for me I think this is in line with the idea that much of what was worked on last year was not Trump's agenda, it was

congressional Republicans' agenda. And the extent that congressional Republicans are not terribly interested in spending a lot of money on an infrastructure plan, they're not really interested in confronting the difficult question of how to pay for one if they did do it. So I think sometime in the past week or two you saw the Chamber of Commerce start to float this idea of raising the gas tax and then Republicans start coming out, no, absolutely not, we're not going to do that. And so I think it's an indication of kind of where Republicans in Congress are with their policy priorities versus where Trump is. And I am inclined to agree with you that the kind of contours of what we're seeing as an early indication of the Trump infrastructure plan is not necessarily going to build a lot of enthusiasm among Democrats. I think Democrats will come out and say this is not enough money, we're not interested in big tax breaks for developers if that's the form this is going to take. But it will be I think interesting and important to watch.

SPEAKER: I think your point, E.J., about a tax incentive-heavy infrastructure plan benefitting well to do states, and frankly a lot of blue states, is an important one that I think Republicans are not fully thinking through. I don't think the president is fully thinking through it either. Yes, there are a lot of roads in blue states, there is a lot of crumbling infrastructure in blue states and other well-to-do states, but if you construct an infrastructure plan about that you are going to be leaving behind a lot of Trump voters and a lot of Trump voting districts, and a lot of districts and states represented almost exclusively Republicans. And I think you'll create this dynamic where you will have Republicans ultimately uneasy with an infrastructure plan that is laden with tax incentives and Democrats oddly a bit bullish about the fact that tax cuts helped spur infrastructure in their state. And you might actually have, for any of you who are fans of Stranger Things, the real Upside Down, where you have Democrats comfortable with tax incentives and Republicans thinking maybe that earmarks idea isn't so bad if it means

being able to get some projects back to my state that tax incentives just aren't able to do.

MR. DIONNE: Yes, just to explain in one sentence, the tax incentives tend to help richer states because private developers who would develop these highways to make some money on them are going to make more money if they do it in rich states than in poor states, and that a lot of those states -- notably New York, California, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Illinois -- are Democratic states. So it's a very curious politics there, even though Democrats instinctively would not want to do the tax cut approach.

My last question, again, down the line, anybody who wants to pick up on it, it seems to me there were two themes that came out of a lot of commentary on Trump's election. One is he's some kind of populist and the other is that this was a "hostile takeover of the Republican party". It seems to me after a year of Trump both of those are now highly questionable. As Molly suggested, this program has largely been a Republican program. There was a story I believe in the *Post* today, the Koch brothers are actually somewhat bullish on Trump now, and there's a reason for that, which leads to the second, which is there's nothing populist about this tax bill or a lot of the other stuff he's done. So in some ways he needs to help his party in the midterms but de-Republicanize himself if he's going to keep his old image. And he needs something to shore up his populist side, and I don't know what that is. I can imagine what he'll offer to Joe Kennedy on the other side of this question. Any thoughts on those two themes?

And we've got people with microphones. If a couple of people could identify themselves to ask the first questions so that -- this lady over here and this gentleman with the camera over here. Why don't each of you take a microphone, but hold on while our folks -- and then that lady over there is the first person. Just to give her a microphone and then we'll be able to move quickly to questions.

But on those two questions, any thoughts?

Jon?

MR. VALANT: Sure. So I'll just say that I think for there to be a hostile takeover of the Republican party we would need a president who had a kind of particular interest in issues and I don't think we've seen very much of that. The president sort of across departments and agencies has been very deferential to others who are actually administering these departments, and they're Republicans. And so I don't see much reason to expect that to change in any way.

MR. DIONNE: In a way the cabinet is as much a Pence cabinet as it is a Trump cabinet.

Anyone else on --

MR. HUDAK: I think the president has a remarkable way of convincing his base what he needs to convince them of. And so you had mentioned in the question, E.J., that in a lot of ways Trump needs to de-Republicanize himself. Actually, I don't think that's true. I think he just needs to convince his base that the ideas that he's supporting Republicans have come along on, even if they've always been Republican ideas. I think, however, the reverse is true. Republicans need to de-Trumpify themselves if they're going to have any success in the midterms, at least in a lot of districts, like the 23 districts held by Republican house members that Hillary Clinton won. And so that's going to be this bizarre tension I think over the next year, the president running closer to the Republican Party and the Republican Party trying to run away from him as much as possible.

MR. DIONNE: And just to put a line under that, Trump seems to have played to his base the entire time, yet the evidence we have is that the size of that base has actually shrunk. I was struck by the surveys that showed roughly 49 percent strongly disapproving of him and only 29 percent strongly approving of him, which is below even

the mid-30s or high 30s where one might have thought his base was. So that playing to base seems not to be succeeding in growing the base but shrinking the base.

Camille?

MR. BUSETTE: Right. So what I was going to say is that I agree with John that the places where the battle for the congressional majority is going to be fought out in November are not the same places that we keep seeing the maligned by some stories about Trump's America. So they're not in like rural Appalachia. That's not where the battle for who's going to control Congress is going to control Congress is going to be in November. It's going to be in the suburban districts, some of which were won by Clinton. And so there Trump plays very differently. And so that's I think the most important thing for me.

MR. DIONNE: Philip Bump in the *Washington Post* wrote a quietly wonderfully ironic story where after all these stories about well the Trump base is still with him, he went out and interviewed Hillary voters in two heavily Hillary counties and said well, the Clinton base is still with her. And it was a very instructive little piece.

You wanted to come in on this?

MS. REYNOLDS: Yes. I just wanted to say one thing about the populism piece of this. And I think it's true from our perspective, the tax reform program certainly was not populist, right, because it definitely favored long-term corporate tax cuts compared to tax cuts for families. But so I do expect the populist element to come out and be articulated when he talks a little bit about immigration policy and I do expect it also to come to be articulated when he talks about trade policy as well. I think those are two areas where he will kind of jam a populist message through.

MR. DIONNE: Yes. I think that's -- I would be a lot of money that you're right about that.

The lady over here in the glasses. Thank you very much.

QUESTIONER: Hi, thank you very much. My name is Renata Jannie; I'm from TV Asahi, it's a Japanese TV station. Foreign policy. I know that usually the State of the Union is a more domestically focused speech, however this past year has been a rather anxious time, especially with North Korea tensions. Do you think it will come up at all? If it does, how will he approach it? If it doesn't, why won't it come up?

Thank you.

MR. DIONNE: We have never been in better shape in the world than we are today. I'm sure we'll hear something like that. Anybody want to take the foreign -- John?

MR. HUDAK: I would agree. I think you're going to see the president taking credit for some movement with regard to the conflict on the Korean Peninsula. I think you're going to see the president take quite a bit of credit for protests in Iran. I think you're going to see the president rightly take credit for what has happened with ISIS in particular. And so there is a lot of trouble in this world for sure. Our colleagues in Brookings Foreign Policy program write about this every day, and I encourage you to check out their blogs and their papers. But there are things that have improved somewhat or improved significantly in terms of foreign policy and you can bet that will be a focus of the president's speech, as it would any president's speech before a joint session. And the level of credit I think will amuse some of the people for whom perhaps credits should accrue, but it's a presidential prerogative to take credit for all the good things and point finger for the bad. I think it will happen for foreign policy tomorrow night.

MR. DIONNE: Camille, go ahead.

MS. BUSETTE: I also think because this is such an unusual presidency that he will take credit for moving issues in the Middle East, particularly with a declaration



of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. And I think other presidents might not do that, but I think he might do that.

MS. REYNOLDS: I also expect him to call for a significant increase in military spending. To the extent that he's had any sort of clear budgetary message throughout the first year, that's been one of the big things he's called for. It's also a sort of important sticking point in the efforts to finish funding the government for the current year. So I expect we'll see some discussion of that too.

MR. DIONNE: And I think -- correct me if you guys think I'm wrong -- I think there's going to be an interesting contrast with other presidential States of the Union where a lot of presidents they use it mostly for domestic political purposes, but they often use it to speak to the world. I suspect that Trump's priority will not be on speaking to the world and that we will hear some straight up America-first rhetoric, which will be another populist piece, or whether real or fake populist, it will have a populist element. Any thoughts on that?

MR. HUDAK: Well, yeah, I think actually functionally it's challenging for the president to do that since Foggy Bottom is a ghost town. When you don't have people in your State Department to be able to vet lines to talk about how this message will be received in foreign capitals, it's very difficult to craft that message. And I think when you have General McMaster and General Kelly in the White House who understand the impact of presidential rhetoric on a stage like this, or on any stage, they may be the ones who would be first to discourage the president from doing this because of the lack of capacity right now in the State Department.

MR. DIONNE: And I'm very curious whether the words Europe or Russia will appear in this speech. It will be interesting to see what he does with that.

Sir?

QUESTIONER: Herb Rose. I suspect that my question may elicit the shortest answer today.

MR. DIONNE: That would be constructive if we could keep moving forward.

QUESTIONER: Trump spent his first year in office, a good portion of it, opposing the policies and issues that came out of the Obama administration. Do you think that there is any issue that he may speak in any way positively about that came out of the Obama administration?

MR. DIONNE: Ooh, now that's actually a -- it's either a very easy or a very hard question. Easy because one would be inclined to no, hard because one would wrack one's brain to think what could he say yes to. Anyone else want to play with that? It's a fun question.

MS. BUSETTE: It is a fun question, but I think the answer is no.

MS. REYNOLDS: Yeah, I mean the sort of first thing that comes to mind actually goes back to something Camille was saying earlier about the state of the economy. And so he I think will try to kind of own what has been an economic recovery that began under the Obama administration. He'll try to say no, this has been a change, this is happening in part because of our tax bill, but certainly because of other things that we've done. But if you kind of take a step back and think about the overall trajectory, obviously it did begin and was meaningfully contributed to by the Obama administration. But beyond that I don't have any thoughts off the top of my head.

MR. DIONNE: You know, Jon, what area where there are pieces of Obama legacy that he might actually be able to say something good about it is in education. I'm curious what, you know.

MR. VALANT: He could. But if he does I would be -- I would expect him

to sort of embrace pieces of legislation from the Obama administration and speak highly of them, but not attach Obama's name. So I think this will be much more of a credit claiming for things he likes that existed before he got there than it would in any way a sort of olive branch to the Democrats.

MR. DIONNE: If everybody, by the way, please keep it brief and with a question mark at the end so that we can include a lot of voices.

QUESTIONER: Contrary to Jon's representations there are a lot of non-college educated white women who actually like their sons, brothers, fathers, and husbands and care about their economic well-being. So with that in mind, doesn't the Democratic response need to push back and say Democrats care about vocational training for everyone, community colleges for everyone, jobs for everyone, and reach out to districts in Wisconsin, Ohio, Florida, and Michigan?

MR. DIONNE: Thank you. And that's a very interesting question because Kennedy is speaking at a vocational school, which suggests something.

I'm going to do a couple at a time. This gentleman on the left; I just saw his hand first.

MR. MARGOLIS: Justin Margolis, the government of Quebec. A question about NAFTA.

MR. DIONNE: Oh, welcome.

MR. MARGOLIS: Thank you. We've noticed --

MR. DIONNE: Dionne is -- hails from Quebec. This was not an ethnic chauvinism on my part that I called upon you. (Laughter)

MR. MARGOLIS: But we've noticed a toning down of the rhetoric from Donald Trump, especially at the American Farm Bureaus, going from the worst deal ever to we're actually renegotiating. And the media has it that there have been some actual

progress happening in Montreal this weekend -- we'll know more today. And I'm wondering, they're starting to acknowledge that talks may go into 2019 given the Mexican elections, the American midterms, and the statutory requirements of USTR and TPA. So, number one, do you think he will go into any detail of this agreement that is responsible for the exports of 34 American states and that whose withdrawal would significantly harm all the economic success that he's been touting over the past year, and, two, how does he spin a renegotiation that could drag on for years but actually lead to a meaningful modernized agreement? And mediation was done by technocrats for a political midterm that has to happen in November.

MR. DIONNE: Those are two great questions. On the voc ed, if I could start with Jon and then -- the voc ed and NAFTA. And you probably want to come in on that too. Go ahead.

MR. VALANT: Sure. I think voc ed is a terrific question. I think that is one place where we might see something soon on the Republican side. Lamar Alexander, who is the chairman of the HELP Committee in the senate, has said that this is going to be a priority for the Republicans. And I --

MR. DIONNE: Who was reforming -- education reforming governor 30 years ago.

MR. VALANT: He is. He has a lot of background in education. And it's an area that I think Democrats have been very receptive. It will be interesting to see if Representative Kennedy talks about it. To E.J.'s point, he is speaking in a --

MR. DIONNE: Diamond Vocational School in Fall River.

MR. VALANT: So that might not be a coincidence. So I think there's a real chance that they will speak to community colleges and sort of worker training. And I do think it should be a priority for them.

MR. DIONNE: You wanted to come in on that?

MS. REYNOLDS: On the trade piece I actually think with respect to NAFTA what we're probably going to hear is something like we are renegotiating NAFTA, folks, so that it sounds as though he's keeping his pledge during the presidential election. I think also he may say something about having pulled out of TPP, the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

MR. DIONNE: Although didn't he drop recently that maybe we'll rejoin it someday.

MS. REYNOLDS: But I think he might reframe that as a positive because I think he's going to hold China out as a real scapegoat in the trade arena. And I think when he does that I think also talking about how we pulled out of TPP and we're essentially trying to remake our relations with the Pacific. I think that might be how that's actually portrayed.

MR. DIONNE: Do you have any thoughts on this? I think that's basically right, that he'll mention it and give us very little detail on NAFTA.

MS. REYNOLDS: Yes, exactly.

MR. DIONNE: Greg, just on your point, I bet Kennedy talks about it a lot in that speech, because they wouldn't have picked that venue if they hadn't been serious about talking about it. But my predictions aren't any good anymore.

The gentleman over here and the gentlelady over there. Yeah, please. And then the lady in the front. Thank you.

MR. CHECCO: Thank you. Larry Checco. I'd like to draw back a little bit on the speech itself and their optics. I think it was Molly who said that Mr. Trump is in deep political trouble. I would dive a little deeper and say he's in deep legal trouble. And as I'm watching this I would be thinking here's a man whose term might be shortened,

maybe not, but may be shortened. But the other thing is, given his challenge to tell the truth how do we know that anything he says on that stage tomorrow night holds water? I mean the guy changes his mind every 20 minutes.

MR. DIONNE: That's a fair point, particularly on immigration in the last three weeks. Please.

MS. FRIEDEN: Hi, Joyce Frieden from *MedPage Today*. I heard that one of his guests is going to be somebody affected by the opioid crisis, and even though they're not expecting healthcare to come up much in the speech do you think that's going to be part of it at all? And I was also interested in what Molly was saying about maybe, you know, little hints about individual mandate repeals.

MR. DIONNE: Thank you for raising that. Just on Larry's point, there is obviously -- there will be the usual Trump fact checking and one is curious if it will be the usual result. But the other point is, there is the legal issue, there is an investigation going on, there is a clear effort by not just Trump but Republicans to discredit the investigation. You know, people have analogized this speech both to speeches Clinton gave during that struggle over impeachment, and obviously Nixon, where he was trying to say -- he said it's time to put Watergate behind us, which didn't work out so well. So I'd be curious about that.

And then the opioids is a big deal. And that's a problem that hits his base that they haven't done anything about yet. So maybe go down the line on either of those or both.

MS. BUSETTE: Sure. Let me answer your question first. I think the fact that not everybody believes the president is lying. Let me say that. So I there are divergent views on that. And I think what people will take away from this is tone. And they're not going to take away the policy specifics. And I think for the most part if he can

make the speech sound genuine, if it's put in his voice, and he emphasizes the places in the speech where he is particularly passionate, I think then he'll come across as being sincere and authentic. And I think that's pretty much all he needs to do with this particular speech.

And then let me just talk a little bit about the opioid crisis. So it is true that he's going to have somebody there. I actually expect that this is going to get very scant attention because there just isn't much for him to say about what he's been doing on that. What he might do is talk a little bit about some of the changes in the Justice Department around greater incarceration for lower level drug offenses. I mean but I really -- I'd look to my colleagues here, but I really cannot see any policy changes that would positively impact people who are suffering from the opioid crisis.

MR. DIONNE: And again I think that's going to be an interesting contrast between the two speeches, because I have a hunch that for the reasons you outlined Kennedy may want to talk about that quite a bit.

MR. HUDAK: I agree with Camille. I think the opioid crisis is going to get pretty limited attention from the president because there's not that much to talk about. I would go a step further. I think it's one of the most disgusting shortcomings of this administration, the amount of work that has been done on the opioid crisis. I would say the same about the previous administration as well. The numbers are not fully calculated yet, but the expectation is that in 2017 more individuals will die of an opioid overdose than in the entire Viet Nam War. That is something that is a staggering statistic that should terrify any American. This is not a white problem, this is not a black problem, this is not an urban problem or a rural problem, this is a problem affecting every community in the United States. And I agree with E.J. that Representative Kennedy is going to talk quite a bit about it, not necessarily because of the white working calls perspective. I think

one jumping off point for Representative Kennedy is actually to quote his cousin who is a co-chair of the President's Opioid Commission who came out last week and said that it is a flop, that it's not doing anything, that it's window dressing. And then to talk about the crisis that this is creating throughout America and how the president has truly failed to protect tens of thousands of lives or even to try to something that might work. And that's a real problem. It's something that, as I said, affects a lot of Americans. It also affects a lot of Trump voting counties. There's some great analysis by your colleague, I think Chris Ingraham in the *Washington Post*, about where these deaths are piling up. It's not something that the president looks at positively. He can't. And I think most Americans don't look at it positively. And because of that he might have his Lenny Skutnik up in the gallery for that purpose, but he doesn't have anything to hang his hat on.

MR. DIONNE: Any other comments?

MS. REYNOLDS: Just back on the individual mandate. Again, I expect Trump to tout that as something that his administration was successful at doing in repealing the Affordable Care Act. I think there's some polling out there that suggests that there are people who in part because the individual mandate was repealed think all of Obamacare has been repealed. Because if we learned something from last year's failed healthcare effort, it's that kind of the messaging around repealing the ACA was as important as actually doing it. And that was so much of kind of the motivating factor driving that legislative fight. And so to the extent that there is anything that Trump can claim credit for I expect him to do so.

MR. VALANT: Can I say, too, quickly, on the question of what do we make of what the president says tomorrow? I will be very cautious in taking anything that he says and expecting much to come from it. Some of that might be because of sort of dishonesty and what we've to learn about the way he speaks. I think just as much is



because of the detachment between the sort of White House politics shop and the actual Republican policy making arm. And a lot of that is happening through Congress, a lot of it is happening through departments.

And there's one example, in his joint address to Congress last February he really emphasized one education proposal, and that was tax credit scholarship programs, which are sort of a form of school choice. And he invited a guest, a young woman who had gone through a tax credit scholarship program in Florida. And we all interpreted that to mean that the next sort of big move in education from the Republicans was going to be to embrace a federal tax credit scholarship program, and then nothing was ever said of it again. And they sort of went in different directions, they tried other things. And it's really I think in large part because the White House just doesn't lead those efforts.

MR. DIONNE: Over here and over here, right in the front row, and then I'll go to the back.

Before we go I just want to say I really appreciate your eloquence on opioids, John, because I think if there's ever a problem that Washington really overlooked over a long period that is destroying a lot of communities across a lot of lines, it's this. So thank you.

Sir?

QUESTIONER: You know, the partisan divide is so deep it's scary. Witness the Congress being paralyzed, et cetera. What should Trump say and what will he say in relation to that?

MR. DIONNE: These are great questions today by the way. Thank you everybody. Sir -- our colleague.

MR. GOTBAUM: Josh Gotbaum, Economic Studies, Brookings.

Normally after a new administration comes in the next congressional election is a setback for that administration. Sometimes it's enormous, like --

MR. DIONNE: 2010 and 2014.

MR. GOTBAUM: Yes. Okay. And sometimes --

MR. DIONNE: Or 2006 on the other side.

MR. GOTBAUM: -- it's less so. My question is, so you would guess normally that immediately after -- that this election would be a move back to the Democrats. My question is, unlike 2010, the economy is objectively a lot better than it used to. And so my question is, in your view, if Trump emphasizes that it's morning in America, so to speak, is that sufficient to offset what would otherwise be a wave?

MR. DIONNE: I love the bookending of these questions, because question one was about what can Trump do to diffuse the partisan fight, question two was how can he win the partisan fight, or not lose as badly as it looks like. And they're both good questions.

John?

MR. HUDAK: So I'll pick up on Josh's question. I think what will determine the question about the president's opportunity to capitalize off of the economy is what happens around public opinion around the economy. What we know right now is that a plurality of Americans believe that the economic growth that has happened over the past year is credited to President Obama. If that changes, if the president begins to get credit for this economy, which you would imagine that should increase as his term goes on, then yeah, the economy will help him. At the same time, the Republican Party is a bit over extended in a lot of districts. They have Republican representatives in Democratic-voting congressional districts. That can work in a situation in which you have unpopular Democratic nominees either for Congress or at the top of the ticket, or you

have a situation in which the Republican president is deeply unpopular. And in those districts, as Molly said well before, in those districts that's a problem. What people love about Trump in a rural district is not how Trump is perceived in suburban Los Angeles.

And so for the president, he has this balancing act between claiming credit for the economy but wondering where that credit actually accrues, because while those numbers may rise in terms of how he's credited, they're not going to rise necessarily in a homogenous way across congressional districts. So he can still face challenges in some of these suburban districts while Republicans are blowing the doors off it elsewhere in the country. And so it creates this real tension I think that the next ten months are going to help inform us about.

MR. DIONNE: Camille?

MS. BUSETTE: Yes. So I wanted to respond to your question about what President Trump should say and what he will say. So let me start off with the easy thing, I think what he will say with respect to closing the partisan divide is that we're going to work with our friends of the Democratic Party on infrastructure. So I think you're going to hear that his sort of opening play for bipartisanship. I do think what he does need to say though, and what will not come up, is he should be talking about how you take a very vibrant economy and utilize that to float all boats so that people who are still suffering and still struggling, and families that are still really having a hard time, that there is some kind of set of government policies that would address those issues for them. He should say that. He also should talk a little bit about what has been a pretty nasty year in race politics. And I don't think he's going to be talking about that, but I think if he were to talk about something like that and even acknowledge the fact that we have a lot of healing and a lot of work to do there, I think that would open up a lot of eyes. And I think even Democrats would be surprised about that.

MR. DIONNE: I want to take a shot at each because I really like this question. On your question, it would seem to me I don't think he's going to do this, but you could think of a number of areas where he could propose initiatives that could pass with bipartisan support. There are a variety of education areas, including voc ed, community colleges have broad support. He could talk about that. There is an immigration deal to be had around dreamers. Democrats have clearly said we'll put up some money for this wall in exchange for dreamers. That's a gettable deal. And then the third would be an actual infrastructure plan that could get some Democratic votes. I think he could do all those things without really deeply tarnishing his "brand", but I don't expect he'll do them.

On your question, three quick points. Trump is as low as he is despite a good economy. That's just interesting all by itself. Second, people's views of the economy over time are now more and more tethered to their partisanship. So people who were doing great under Obama who happen to be Republicans, would say the economy is doing lousy now. People who were doing badly under Trump would say the economy is doing great. So that's a weird thing that's happened to economic perceptions. There's always a little of that, but it's become more pronounced. I think the Republican goal -- they're down, depending on the poll, 10 or 15 points. If they can only use the economy to drive themselves down to about five points negative they might be able to have gerrymandering take care of the rest. And so I think their goal is to -- I mean just that's a mathematical statement, not a political statement. You know their goal is to see if they can create just a little bit of economic better feeling to cut that deficit down to where they might still manage to hang on.

MS. REYNOLDS: Right and to -- they also have to sort of work against what has been -- so Democrats have been doing a reasonably good job laying the

groundwork necessary to take advantage of a potential wave towards the Democrats. So they've been doing very well in candidate recruitment, Republicans have been doing less well in terms of retirements by incumbents, Democratic congressional candidates have been doing very well on fundraising and that sort of thing. So you see these kind of cross cutting forces. And you're absolutely right that to the extent that we have an iron law of American politics, it's that the president's party loses seats in his first midterms, but the dynamics on the economy will be interesting to watch.

MR. DIONNE: We've hit the time but this crowd has been so intelligent and thoughtful that I want to do one more round of questions. And also I'll go down the line and so I want you all to answer either or both of the last questions, but also use it as an opportunity for any closing thoughts you haven't gotten out yet.

Last two hands. The lady right there and the gentleman in the beard, if I may. I identify him that way -- the bearded gentleman. (Laughter) but the lady in the back there first.

QUESTIONER: Good morning. My name is Rebecca Theme. This touches a little bit on the statement that Molly opened up with about the relative unimportance of what comes out of the State of the Union, and something Camille said about whether it really matters what he says or more the tenor and tone of what kind of comes out of it.

One of the things that has troubled me the most about his presidency is the lack of credibility and the other question earlier about the running counts on the lies that have been well documented in many of the mainstream media. Does he have an opportunity here and does it matter? Will he do anything with it or does it really matter if he were to take a stand and obviously realizing that credibility has to build over time again?

MR. DIONNE: Thank you. Sir?

MR. FREED: I'm Richard Freed from Eastern Kentucky University. One of the comments you made, I think, was about education was that America is happy with education. I hope that's not what you said because I think across the country, ever since Ronald Reagan, support for public education has decreased at every level. And I think it's a great important problem.

MR. DIONNE: Has decreased you said?

MR. FREED: Decreased. So that universities are supported by the estate, struggle desperately and no longer have much support. And it goes all across the spectrum I believe. So would you comment on that?

MR. DIONNE: Why don't we start with you, Jon, and then we can work up from you.

MR. VALANT: Sure, I'm happy to. I'm not sure what comment you're referring to, which doesn't mean I didn't say it. It is not the case that Americans are sort of thrilled with the state of public education. That is true in both parties. They like kids, they like teachers, and there are lots of components of education systems that are very popular and actually which often make those subjects very ripe for discussion in something like a State of the Union Address. I don't think we're going to hear very much of it.

But on the sort of the broader politics of education what has happened over the last year is in choosing Betsy DeVos as his education secretary the president basically picked a fight with -- first of all with the most powerful interest group far and away in education, which is teachers' unions, and then also with just sort of teachers and the public. And so I'm not sure we've ever seen education politics as divisive as they are now. I'm not sure there's a path out of that as long as Secretary DeVos is the secretary.

So I certainly would not say that everyone is thrilled right now with where we are.

MS. REYNOLDS: So in terms of kind of Trump's credibility and what he says, I think the real opportunity for him is not with the public but with Congress and sending clear signals to Congress about what he cares about and what he wants them to be working on. And if the experience with immigration policy over the past six to nine months is any indication, I'm not optimistic we get that out of this speech. But I think that's a place where he has the potential to make inroads, but also where his track record is going to make it really hard for members of Congress who are sitting there listening to the speech to really think that, okay, what he's saying now is the position he really holds and that he's going to stick to going forward on especially immigration, but really any other issue he puts forth that Congress is likely to take up.

MR. HUDAK: I think the challenge on the point of credibility -- and this is not just a syndrome that President Trump suffers from but a syndrome that many presidents do -- is that during a State of the Union speech presidents say things that they believe to be true regardless of what the facts tell them. And so these are opportunities to say what you believe. And I think in a lot of circumstances the president genuinely believes what he is saying. I'm sure there are times where he does not. But I think a lot of times he has been convinced of something or he has convinced himself of something to be true and then he says those words. Is that a problem -- absolutely. You know, lies in our politics are problems. But I think there's a difference there in terms of what a president might do when you recognize the fact that the president doesn't believe that he is misleading the American people because he truly believes what he is saying.

And then for quick roundup statement, E.J., I think one of the important things for tomorrow night is to put the speech into perspective and not to get carried away with a rating of or a grading of it. I think our media, present company excluded -- my

apologies, E.J. -- often times turn a State of the Union Speech into a superlative. President Trump's first address to a Joint Session last year was the moment he became presidential. It was actually a garbage speech. (Laughter) There was nothing stunning about it. He read from a teleprompter -- great. There were State of the Union addresses from President Obama that were going to go down in the annals of history as some of the finest rhetoric our republic has ever seen. President Obama gave a bunch of garbage State of the Union addresses (laughter), but media needs to seize on these to say what wondrous occasions they are and how presidential these men are on the dais. And it's generally bad analysis because these speeches tend to be really poor speeches. And I think if media can contain themselves in either direction tomorrow night, that will be the story to take away. (Laughter)

MS. BUSETTE: Well, it's going to be hard to top that, but I do think that the function of the speech really is to lay out the Republican policy program and I think it's going to be a failure in that respect. I do think he's going to be pretty effective at saying to his base, I've got your back and scant examples, but I think he'll still be there and that will still be a main message for him. And I think the fact that he's going to fail to articulate a Republican program is going to open the opportunity for Representative Joe Kennedy to really seize the opportunity to lay out what a potential Democratic policy program might be.

MR. DIONNE: I want to thank our panel. First, for those of you who read my column you will know that when I say to John I'm not worried about curbing my enthusiasm about this speech, it's actually a believable pledge. (Laughter) But I just want to remove myself from my views and just look at it analytically. Bear in mind what Molly said, which is critical, which is -- and I don't think this is a good thing for the country by the way. Viewership of these speeches is now terribly partisan and so a lot of people



who are not for Trump will not be watching the speech. That's very important.

However, I think he has two objectives that are intention and it will be interesting to see if he can achieve either of them. One is my guess is that maybe 10 percent of the country is disillusioned with him but might be persuaded to be less disillusioned. We could probably do an analysis to see whether it's early 8 percent or 12 percent, but somewhere in that range. Can he speak to them, can he be at all reassuring to them? The other problem Republicans have is that the enthusiasm of their own side is low, and so can he gin up the enthusiasm of his own side. Doing those two things at the same time is hard, but I think that is his political objective in a speech whose ratings may not be very high.

I want to thank this very distinguished panel and thank a great audience for wonderful questions. (Applause)

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