

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
POLICY 2020: Your guide to the presidential election
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(Music)

DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews.

On today's episode, with the U.S. presidential election just over a year away, Brookings expert David Wessel leads a discussion with experts Elaine Kamarck and Stuart Butler on the new initiative from Brookings called Policy 2020.

Policy 2020 offers voters fact-based, non-partisan explainers, in English and Spanish, on key policy issues in the presidential election.

Visit brookings.edu/Policy2020 to get issue guides we're calling voter vitals, read big ideas from Brookings experts on pragmatic and actionable proposals for America's next president, and sign up for the Policy 2020 newsletter to get updates on all new materials. Again, it's all at brookings.edu/Policy2020.

Also on today's show in a new Coffee Break, meet Stephanie Aaronson, the new Vice President and Director of Economic Studies at Brookings.

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And now, here's David Wessel with Elaine Kamarck and Stuart Butler.

WESSEL: I'm David Wessel, director of the Hutchins Center on Fiscal and Monetary Policy here at Brookings, and I'm joined today by Elaine Kamarck, who's a senior fellow in Governance Studies and director of the Center for Effective Public Management. Elaine has a Ph.D. in political science, she lectures at the Kennedy School, worked in the Clinton-Gore White House, and is a member of the Democratic National Committee.

I'm also joined by Stuart Butler who has, interestingly, a Ph.D. in American economic history from St. Andrews in Scotland. He's a senior fellow in Economic Studies at Brookings with particular interest in health policy. He came to Brookings in 2014 after 35 years at the Heritage Foundation. And last time I checked Stuart is not a member of the Democratic National Committee.

BUTLER: That's correct.

WESSEL: And we're going to talk today a little bit about something we're calling Policy 2020, a project of the Brookings Institution to help illuminate the issues that are going to be very important during the coming presidential campaign. You can see it at brookings.edu/Policy2020.

And Elaine, I wonder if I could start with you. You were the inspiration for something we're calling Voter Vitals 2020. What was it that led you to think we should do this and what is it anyways?

KAMARCK: Well, what led me to think we should do this is my experience in many presidential campaigns. And what happens in presidential campaigns is people start debating each other, both in the primaries and in the general, and they start throwing out a bunch of numbers, and a bunch of terms, and each one picks their own numbers, and it gets very confusing to the voter.

And so I thought that it would be a service to the voters if we laid some groundwork for understanding these debates. So, Voter Vitals is dedicated to providing a sound factual basis for many of the issues that we're going to hear people talking about in the 2020 primaries and in the 2020 general election.

WESSEL: Right. I think it's interesting that we're trying to prove that there's still room in the current political debate for facts and dispassionate analysis. And I think what Voter Vitals attempts to do is give people a foundation for understanding issues, but it kind of rests on the premise that people who have different political perspectives and disagree on policy can agree on a common set of facts.

Stuart, I think in today's Washington and if you follow it from reading the newspaper or if anybody does that anymore or watching TV, it seems like everything is completely polarized. You go to your favorite URL or Twitter feed to see people telling you things that you agree with. And your next door neighbor who voted the other way does the opposite. I know that you don't share the view that all is lost and we should despair. So I wonder if you could talk a little bit about what is the role for scholars and think tanks and commonly accepted facts in today's polarized debate?

BUTLER: Well I think first of all the impression that everything is completely polarized and nobody talks to each other--it's almost like a self-fulfilling impression because you just hear about everybody reports on it, and so on. But the fact is that underneath all this there are a lot of conversations going on and very vigorous debates going on that don't make it to Twitter and don't make it on the news. And I'm very heartened by this because I think the amount of this and the pace of this is really not much different than it's been.

I've been in Washington on these issues for almost 40 years and I see the same kind of conversations taking place. And I would say that, first of all, I think there are to some extent an agreed set of facts, so I think we can delve into that little bit more because I think one can have disputes about facts without one side being in favor of facts and the other side being against facts. And then there's just sort of processes that are available that are being used by people in the think tank community by people on the Hill and so forth to actually have constructive conversations that hopefully will gradually seep into the presidential campaign and other campaigns. And I'm reasonably confident that some of those will.

WESSEL: So I think Daniel Patrick Moynihan is famous for saying everybody's entitled to their opinion but everybody's not entitled to the same set of facts. It does seem to me that today that that is in question and that people really do look at the same social phenomena or economic situation and try to bolster their argument by picking a different starting date or a different inflation number and it's as if nothing is fixed. You don't think that's it?

BUTLER: Well I think it's certainly true that people play games with facts you've said something picking a certain point in time which gives a different impression and so on. And I think that certainly does happen.

On the other hand I think there is a reasonable debate about what facts are relevant to a particular debate. If that were not true, serious scholars in almost every field would surely be agreeing on both what the facts are and what they indicate. And that's not true. We see lots of areas where it's not abundantly obvious what is the right set of facts to look at. One example of that would be the continuing debate over interventions with children at a very early stage in life, the Head Start program, and others, and what is the impact of that. If you look at a certain period after these children start school it's very unclear whether a big investment early on, we've learned, really does

pay off. If you start to look a little bit later in their life, or maybe sometimes during their teenage years, we're beginning to see evidence that there's actually a significant impact.

So that's an example of where you could argue about what facts are relevant in a particular time, and we're actually learning that sometimes. There's hardy debates over that. I think it's not a question of one side supports facts, one side doesn't. I think there really is a reasonable debate taking place, as there always has been in science as in economics and so on, about which facts are relevant to the particular point you're trying to make.

WESSEL: Elaine?

KAMARCK: Well I'll give you a real-life example from the 2000 campaign when I worked for Al Gore. Al Gore had spent a long period of time in the Clinton administration working on reinventing government. One of the things that he wanted to brag about was having shrunk the size of the government. And so we confronted an interesting factual situation. The Republicans said, oh no, Al Gore didn't do anything. All the shrinkage in the government came from the Pentagon and it was a peace dividend and Al Gore didn't really do anything.

We had to counter by saying, well, yes, the percentage of people cut from the Pentagon was fairly large because you didn't need so many civilians if you had a smaller military. But the percentages were the same across the government. It was just that because the Pentagon is the 800 pound gorilla of the civilian government, the actual numbers from the Pentagon were bigger than everyone else. And yet the percentages from smaller departments like the Education Department were the same. So in other words both set of facts in that situation were correct. Then once you understood that you could sort of sort your way through these two contradictory claims.

BUTLER: I might add just another wrinkle on this, too. Sometimes an intense and appropriate debate that, if you like, fine tunes statistics or data can get in the way of what different interpretations of data actually indicate as a major issue.

I'll give you a very good example of this, which, actually, when I was at the Heritage Foundation we had a project with Brookings at the time, the so-called Fiscal Wake Up Tour. And we would go around the country, and this is in the early 2000s and mid-2000s, to talk to people about the long term debt and deficit and its impact on the economy and why people should worry about it. Now in that era there were legitimate debates about exactly if you were looking at spending levels and projections especially about what the issues were and there were arguments about that.

But we came to a conclusion that the range of argument about these specific facts, the degree of disagreement, was so narrow that it was in a sense irrelevant for the bigger argument we were making. So when we went out on that tour we agreed on a whole set of facts, principally coming from the Congressional Budget Office and forecasts, where each of us had some dispute about those facts. But we said, that's nothing, that dispute is very tiny compared with the common problem they're all showing. So we went around and we just agreed on the facts, even if we felt there were some issues because we wanted to make the point to the audience that all reasonable people looking at this saw a pattern that was very clear and that's what we wanted to talk about.

WESSEL: All right I guess I'm a little less sanguine. I think that there are things that are not true that I see on Twitter or in newspaper accounts or coming out of the words of politicians. And that's different than a disagreement about what the evidence shows on early childhood. But let's leave that aside.

Elaine, you talked about the role of the campaign in putting out information and obviously campaigns are marketing for their candidate. And we know that there are also advocacy groups with clear agendas that often back up their point of view with some numbers or some assertions sometimes reasonable, sometimes not. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about how you see the role of a think tank like Brookings at a time like this when there's a lot of argument over policy.

KAMARCK: Well I think I see it in two ways, right. The first way is simply to understand that there are facts. They are justified. And there may be a range of those facts. But there are facts.

So for instance, one of the arguments we'll hear a lot about in this campaign is illegal immigration into the United States. Well, there are methodologies for describing and understanding how many illegal immigrants there are, since illegal immigrants do not raise their hand and say, oh please count me. And that gives you a range. And I think that one of the things we're going to try to do here is explain what that range is and how people can come to it.

Now, when you're outside of that range, right, when you're dramatically outside of the range where people on both sides of the aisle would agree, then I think you've got to call people on it and people are just making up stuff and that is a problem.

I think the second thing that Brookings can do is that there's so many policies that sound great but are really difficult to implement. So they fall on the implementation. Of course the most famous one was Trump's claim during the 2016 campaign that he was going to build a wall and make Mexico pay for it. Well, the making Mexico pay for it was absurd at the time, and it's absurd now. And people needed I think to say that more.

To be equally bipartisan, if we look at a wealth tax, which is very popular in which we are going to do some writing about. One of the big problems with a wealth tax that has caused some Scandinavian countries to go back on having a wealth tax is it's awfully hard to administer. It's just really hard to figure this stuff out.

So I think one of the things that think tank can do in addition to establish the proper range of facts is to, say, add a degree of realism to the political debate.

WESSEL: Interesting, Stuart, you mentioned the Congressional Budget Office and I wondered if you could talk a little bit about the institutions that are responsible for both helping us make sense of problems but also the informal institutions that may allow us to make progress even while there seems to be so much mud splattering in the public.

BUTLER: Yes, I think the role of institutions in this debate, like a lot of other issues, is crucially important. It doesn't mean that those institutions have to be always correct, or without any possible error. But they have to be respected as providing information within the range, as Elaine said, that seems reasonable and that people can act on.

One of the biggest worries I think many of us in the think tank community and elsewhere have had over the last two or three years is that some of those institutions have been attacked in ways that are unfair and that undermine the ability of ordinary Americans to place any trust in those. And I think when you look at how issues get resolved over time successfully it often requires some authority, some trusted authority, to be weighing in that limits the range of what people can in real conscience say. And I'm very worried about that. That is an area I am very concerned about, the Congressional Budget [Office] being one although I think it's probably withstood the attacks it had a

year or two ago. But it's very important to have those institutions and undermining those can be very damaging.

I think one of the things that think tanks can do in that situation is help bolster the reputation of institutions, to explain how important they are to these conversations, and to reinforce with other forms of information what these major institutions are trying to say. And I think that's certainly true when you start looking at the whole issue of the economy, of debt and deficits in the future, and there are many institutions that do that.

I think another thing and I'd just like to add this to the range of things one might talk about in this area, that sometimes it's very important to try to look at how do you depoliticize an issue? And that's often a hard thing to do. I think sometimes people feel that the right way to get anything done is to make sure it is front and center in the political debate. And sometimes that's true and it does lead to solutions and to progress. Sometimes it's better to get these issues out of the public picture because when that happens you actually do get people willing to come to the table and talk through things and begin to build momentum for change over time because it's sort of under the radar. And I think we shouldn't underestimate progress under the radar.

WESSEL: Right. You've done a good job of that I think in both at Brookings and in this group that you've been involved, convergence, of away from the glare of the TV lights, having people who have very different agendas talking about an issue like retirement or Congressional Budget Office process or something like that.

It seems to me that what we're trying to do here is a little bit like good journalism that I used to practice when I was at the Wall Street Journal, which is if somebody wonders what is the wealth tax, or how many people lack health insurance, and they type that into Google, that they will come to a Voter Vital and there'll be a relatively short piece that's as if we were talking to a neighbor about something without a lot of the complexities, but acknowledging where there are differences and pointing to them. And I think that that's something that we can contribute to this debate. A lot of us do this all the time when reporters call us, but as we know the press is a mediating institution has lost some of its authority and so we're looking for ways to reach people directly.

But I think it's also true that there are plenty of people at Brookings, many of them very accomplished scholars, who have firm views about what we should do about a particular problem. And as part of the Policy 2020 there's a separate stream called Big Ideas where every paragraph will say, Congress should, the president should, the Department of Health and Human Services should, and I think we have a role in that too. But it's sometimes important to do the first, to just say look here are the basically choices we have to make and people will make different choices. And here's some stuff that can help you answer the question when you hear someone talk about something in the presidential debate and it goes by so fast you have no clue what they're talking about.

Elaine, I wonder if you could talk a little bit about the Democratic primary. What are two or the three of the big issues that you think, policy issues that will be recurring that people should be understanding if they want to understand the choices.

KAMARCK: Well, the first one of course is health care. And this is always an issue in a Democratic primary. And frankly for many years it has run the same gamut from how do we get to universal health care, and are we there yet. And so I think that a lot of the stuff we will be publishing in the Voter Vitals will be just sort of a base understanding of who is insured, and who was uninsured at any given point in time, and how does that change. A lot of people don't realize that

there's a lot of shifting around in that uninsured population literally from year to year, or even sometimes quarter to quarter. So I think we'll try to explain that.

And then I think in the Big Ideas pieces, we will get people writing about the options that are before us and what they think are the realistic options as we discuss things like Medicare for All, and like a public option for health care. So health care is certainly going to be a big one.

WESSEL: Stuart, how do you judge the Democratic debate on health care? Where are you worried and where are you encouraged?

BUTLER: I think the good thing about the debate on the Democratic side is there are big ideas. Medicare for All. And also I think a big idea is actually continuing what we're doing and refining it. I think that's conceptually a very important way of thinking about it.

What's good about that of course is that it does get people to think much more clearly about what ultimately do we want to see in this country. It's a challenge for the Democrats to do this because for the very reasons that Elaine mentioned. Once you start digging into facts associated with some of these big picture ideas it has a lot of inconvenient facts that come out making life a little bit difficult. So I think that's bound to happen when you have big ideas on the table.

But I'm certainly a big idea advocate. I do think it's very important to stretch people's thinking, the electorate's thinking, about where ultimately do they want to be. Often I think that can be very beneficial of giving politicians on both sides a much clearer impression of what I might call the visceral view of most Americans. They may not understand the facts, they may be befuddled by facts, but they have a feeling about where they want the country to go. And if you start raising long term ideas that begin to speak to that you get, in these conversations if you like or in these debates, a much better sense of where the country's ready to go and how you can lead it there.

WESSEL: Interesting. Yeah. I think the debates about do you want to give up your private health insurance are a good way--

BUTLER: Absolutely, it's fundamental, it's fundamental. I'm somebody who has criticized the existing system frequently on the messiness of the current system. But I think there's no question that Americans are very conservative in the sense of being very nervous about big change in this very fundamental part. I think for good reason given how the government can really mess things up.

So I think it's good to understand that, that maybe we are in a situation where Democrats should be thinking about how to present a big picture sense of where the country could go which actually has sort of a gradual way of getting there rather than a sudden big change.

KAMARCK: Well you know Elizabeth Warren had a very good line, a big applause line at one of the recent debates, she said why on earth would anyone run for president to do small things. Well, everybody applauded because people like the idea of big ideas. But actually, when push comes to shove, okay, dramatic and sudden change for hundreds of millions of people it's not always the most popular way to go. And so politician after politician has been caught up advocating one of these things and then having it blow up in their faces.

All you have to do is go way back to the late 1980s and the Medicare bill that was passed that basically was repealed 16 months later --

WESSEL: A long term care thing, right?

KAMARCK: Yeah it was repealed --

BUTLER: Catastrophic care.

KAMARCK: Yea, catastrophic care, that's what it was. And it was repealed 16 months later. I mean it literally blew up in the faces of the politicians who thought they knew where the public was on this. But then when they actually did it the public said, no wait a minute, we don't want that.

WESSEL: But the listeners are getting here is what I've learned at Brookings is we have a large number of very young and promising research assistants here. And we also have a number of scholars who's been around so long that this stuff that the RAs learned as history the people at Brookings were involved in real time. Sometimes I think it's the social science equivalent of going to the VFW hall and hearing about the Korean War.

Elaine, so what's another one besides health care you think it's going to be significant?

KAMARCK Well, I think it gun control will be a big one. And again here the Democrats are all basically on the side of further restriction of access to guns. But they have had their disagreements about how you do that. Do you do buybacks? What kinds of what kinds of legal strategies do you use? And of course that would be a big point of difference in the fall between the Republican nominee, whoever he or she is, and the Democrats. So that will be a big one.

I think there will also be a question of how do we conduct our foreign policy. And foreign policy is usually not very important in campaigns, usually domestic issues take over. But I think there's been an issue with this president. His treatment of our allies and then his seemingly cozying up and friendliness towards dictators and autocrats. I think that's going to be an issue and it'll be a clear point of differentiation about how the Democrats view the world and how Trump views the world. And I'm not saying Republicans, because I don't think a lot of Republicans actually agree with Trump but I think that will be a difference.

WESSEL: Interesting, you always tell me that foreign policy doesn't really matter in campaigns. You've changed your mind.

KAMARCK: Well, I did change my mind. But again it only matters in the in the sort of grand general sense, not in what's your what's our attitude towards Yemen and Somalia. That's too granular.

WESSEL: Right. Stuart, do you have any idea of what policy issues if any will be significant in the general election?

BUTLER: I do think that the gun issue is going to be an important part in that debate leading up the election. It could go in various directions, I think. The very fact that Elaine used the term gun control ... language matters and one of the, I've certainly discovered in my work, is that unintentionally putting a word into a modifier can dramatically change the way the conversation takes place. So I think that you could have a constructive conversation about guns, related to safety, related to a lot of issues, who has guns and so forth. And we do see some steady progress on that amidst all the noise, I think. So it could be an issue that breaks in some rather different ways during an election. The election may shake out the way in which Americans do want this issue discussed and what they're willing, what the parameters are, without any dramatic benefit to one party or the other. I don't think either party's going to get a slam dunk benefit from talking about guns.

WESSEL: Right. So do you have a politically acceptable synonym for gun control?

BUTLER: I just think guns. No. I mean I really do. Because a lot of people have different ideas of what they mean by that. And it's really important, I think, to try to keep the table as wide as possible as to who can take part in that conversation. If people think that that this means taking my guns away and getting rid of the Second Amendment and the government takes over my life, you don't get any progress with something like that. You've got to figure out how to do this.

I certainly feel that sometimes presidential campaigns in particular are sort of dark days for serious conversation about any issue. They may give you some, like I said, subliminal kind of aspects, it may give you some general ideas, but I think the hard work takes place after that for the most part.

KAMARCK: Can I say having been in several presidential campaigns as a policy person, there is this gap between what the policy people say and what the speechwriters write. And then there's another gap between that and what the reporters report. So, along the way facts can get turned into things that nobody ever intended them to be.

WESSEL: It's also the case, I once when I first came to Brookings we were thinking about doing an organized comparison of budget policies from different campaigns. And we were thinking about getting some other think tanks involved so it would seem very nonpartisan and didn't actually come to pass. But one economist who had been an adviser to a president said to me, are you sure it's a good idea for these guys to be specific because when they get specific they tend to rule out things that are unpopular and that binds them when they actually realize and they get to office they have to do them ...

KAMARCK: That's right.

WESSEL: I mean, Bill Clinton campaigned on a middle-class tax cut that evaporated as soon as he was presented with the deficit numbers.

KAMARCK: Well, you know David, that brings up even a larger question which is certainly in the 2000 campaign which is the last campaign that I did...

WESSEL: Who was running in that campaign, Elaine? Remind the...

KAMARCK: Al Gore and George Bush. In that campaign, you would have thought that they were running to be the chairmen of the school board of the United States of America. Both of them went from event to event talking about education. Now, having been in the White House for more than four years, I can tell you that the amount of time a president of the United States spends on education in a week is about probably 10 minutes, on average over a year. And the reason is that education policy is almost exclusively the province of localities in the United States. And yet presidents spend an awful lot of time on national security, on intelligence, on military matters, et cetera. And yet in every presidential campaign I have ever been involved in, right, the amount of time they spend on the issues that the president of the United States actually deals with is always much smaller than the amount of time they spend on other issues that governors and mayors and school board chairmen deal with.

WESSEL: My worst story is, I can't remember which campaign it was but I was in a conversation with Larry Summers who was advising the Democrat, Michael Boskin who was advising the Republican.

And the subject was the increase in the fraction of women who were working. And each of these economists had backed themselves into a corner where Larry was basically forced to argue that the only reason these women were going to work is because wages were so low that their family couldn't support themselves on one income.

And Michael Boskin was forced to argue that this is all great, liberation of women, and they're all working because they wanted to. And I'm sitting there thinking, neither of you actually believe what you just said ... how did you find yourself in this high school debate?

But I wonder, Stuart you make a very good point. We at a place like Brookings and other think tanks would love it if there was a menu of options on the table and you could say I'm going to vote for the person whose policies are closest to my preferences. And but that's not really the way it works. So, do you think that the policies like gun control, or how to deal with the problem of the uninsured, or how much we should worry about the deficit, do you think in the end they really have a big impact on presidential elections or is it just the music behind and it's not really what matters?

BUTLER: I think it's more the music behind. I don't think that's necessarily a bad thing for actually the reasons we mentioned. You get somebody, you force people to take a position on something very clear and often it's a bad decision, and your own advisers will say that. So you lock yourself into something which makes it harder later on.

I think what we're going to see in this election, probably more than the many in the last several years, is this confidence level about whether a candidate can solve problems generally, and problems that you care about generally.

So I think the foreign policy is a good example of that. I think Ellen's absolutely right. The election is not going to turn on policy toward Yemen or even Ukraine, probably ... may not be important.

But it is going to turn on how confident are you about somebody making good decisions in that area. And that can come out in debate, it can come out in various ways.

I think in other areas feeling that the person that's running shares your vision about where you want to end up in some way, that's the most important thing to get across in an election. If that comes across then I think other people including people at think tanks can start filling in the details, principally after the election.

So I don't think of elections as being as though people from Brookings and Heritage were running, and it was a big debate about your position papers. I think Hillary Clinton learned, among other things, that that probably wasn't what the debate was going to be about.

KAMARCK: Well that's right, and I'll add another factor into Stuart's analysis, which is look, political parties, they matter, they matter a lot. Everybody likes to think political parties are irrelevant or ... No. Tell me what party somebody identifies with and I will tell you how they're going to vote. It is a very powerful predictor of the vote. And the reason it is that parties are shorthands. They're shorthands for a range of approaches to issues, and people who do not have time to read Brookings position papers. But hopefully they'll read some Voter Vitals.

People look at their party affiliation, they say, well you know I'm really more like those guys than I am like those other guys. And that does tend to drive presidential elections. Positions on issues come in around the margins and with the swing. So we did see in 2018 a group of Republican

suburban women switch to Democrats in some key districts around the country. And that is people are not quite sure why they did it, but they think that part of it was Trump's demeanor. Part of it was his immigration policies at the border with families. There are a variety of reasons. But that group will be targeted by both political parties next time around.

As will another group: white women with no college education. Women with college education are very much in the Democratic camp. White women without college education were very much in the Republican camp. They tended to vote for Trump as did their husbands and partners. And this time it looks like they may be a little bit more up for grabs. So in an election you try and find whatever group you can to pull away from the other side to you. And that's where you look for issues that may resonate with them.

WESSEL: Stuart, I admire your optimism but I worry a little bit that things have deteriorated in Washington. So that if you look at what's going on in this administration, there's certainly been some degradation of the notion of the objective technocrat. You see it on climate change. There seems to be a move to come to a conclusion and then can you push the facts in that direction more than we usually have in the past. There certainly is a lack of appreciation of the civil servant and stuff, the people who who've served both parties and try to give them the information they need in as best a way they can. Am I missing something here or do you don't agree with me?

BUTLER: Let me make clear my I may be optimistic in a broad sense, I am a historian after all, I tend to think in rather longer periods than some others, I think a little bit more beyond next November. But I would agree that there are some very disturbing patterns in the last few years. And one is I think just to pick up on what Elaine said, if you look at party affiliation as a predictor about how you would vote and how you would think about things, I think one of things we see on the Republican side now is that the old shorthand was somebody would vote Republican and would go along with a set of issues which were pretty coherent and predictable.

That seems to have changed a lot. I mean, when I clearly called myself a Republican in those days I thought, well, that means free trade, it means a really big concern about the long-term deficit and debt, and so forth. Apparently, I have the wrong script. So I think that's a concern.

I do think that point you made about attacking institutions, which we talked about a bit earlier, I think is a very worrying pattern.

So yes, I think there is a lot to be very concerned about in this area. And I think it underscores how politics very recently in these elections, both recently and in the near future, really have centered on confidence about people or lack of confidence about people as leaders rather than issues.

And I think that's just important to bear in mind, particularly if you're in the think tank community that looking at the debates over facts and issues are not probably going to play the role that they have in the past.

That said, I think you do also need to look at the political process very broadly. The future of the country is not only going to be decided by what a present United States says they're going to do. It's also affected by what goes on in Congress, and lots of things go on in Congress that don't hit the headlines and are very important. It matters what happens in states. States have become very active in areas like health care in part because of skepticism that the federal government is going to give the kind of leadership that they would have wanted. And you see the health care industry feeling that way as well.

So sometimes in this situation ... remember we are a federal system. There are lots of parts to government. And so we can actually see progress occurring even when we are alarmed, concerned, depressed about what is happening in an upcoming election.

WESSEL: I think, Elaine, you made a really good point that sometimes our role is to say that sounds good but you haven't thought it through. It seems to me that the student loan situation is a perfect example--

KAMARCK: perfect example--

WESSEL: A couple of Democrats have called for just forgiving all student debt. And I do think that we can contribute to that conversation by pointing out that, you know, a lot of this debt is held by people went to medical school and law school and business school who actually don't need to be forgiven, they're doing quite well. And so I think one of the roles of the Voter Vital is to point the reader to, this is a proposal that's out there, you might want to read this thing which describes the consequences which were not obvious when you heard the speaker.

KAMARCK: That's right. And I think that that applies to so many of the issues that we're going to be talking about. I mean, take that this the number of the uninsured in the country, right? To hear the Democrats tell it you'd think that there was a massive number of people uninsured. To hear the Republicans talk about it, you would think that this was absolutely not a problem, and the free market just simply was going to take care of everybody and if we'd only stop messing with the free market everything would be okay.

Well in fact there are a number of uninsured. It is difficult to get to them. But we have actually developed some ways to get to them. And so the actual facts are really somewhere in between. And that goes on with every single issue that's out there.

And again, one of our purposes here is to create a factual basis, even if that factual basis is a range, and let people understand how legitimate scholars or policy people on either side of the aisle can come into that discussion within that range. Now, you do get your Twitter wars, and you get you get all the nonsense that's on the Internet, where sometimes the stuff is just wildly inaccurate. And I think there we have a role and say, no, that is simply not true by anyone's estimate.

BUTLER: I would just want to accentuate what Elaine just said about how it's really important for think tanks to look at the range of issues and ranges of opinion and see where there can be agreement as well as pricking the balloon sometimes in simple ideas. Because I think you do have to think of the election as one stage in a process of change occurring in the country.

And so it's really important for the think tank community to constantly watch debates, and watch what's going on, and where people are to start trying to imagine to construct in our own minds where the range is, what some of the options within that range could be, where different people could agree on that. I think it's a really important function. Probably even more so now than in a lot of other elections. It's precisely when there's lots of noise, false numbers being thrown around, that I think serious people have to think about what next after this and how can we construct a kind of a new norm about what the parameters can be in solving. Because if you look at the history of the United States, the noise of elections usually augurs in another period where things start to happen and decisions are made that bring people together much more effectively and are based on some common understandings that developed often within these elections.

WESSEL: I think that's a good place to end our conversation. Elaine Kamarck, Stuart Butler, thank you very much. And again you can read about our 2020 effort at www.brookings.edu/Policy2020.

And now here's Stephanie Aaronson, vice president and director of Economic Studies.

AARONSON: Hi, my name is Stephanie Aaronson and I'm the vice president and director of the Economic Studies Program at the Brookings Institution.

I mostly grew up in Massachusetts, although now I've spent about half of my life in Washington, D.C.

When I was growing up, my family was very interested in politics and social issues, and I became interested in those issues, too. And as I thought about what I wanted to be, I wanted to find a way that I could have an impact on the social arena and my disposition. I think led me to choose being a scholar, more of an academic approach to trying to address different social issues and economic issues that the country faces. But I was always interested in doing so with a focus on what would be useful for economic policy.

I think the most important issue we're facing today is how we can make our economy work well for everyone. America is one of the wealthiest countries in the world, but there's still a lot of people who are insecure and don't have the resources that they need to reach their full potential. And the question I think we face is how can we ensure that our economic system and our institutions are working for everyone? I'm interested in the question of how we can make sure that our labor market in particular is working for everyone who wants a job.

So I just finished writing a paper on whether what we call hot labor markets when the unemployment rate is very low are particularly beneficial to workers who are normally disadvantaged in the economy. And knowing the answer to that question can help policymakers to figure out how they can best promote the expansion in a way that will serve everyone.

I think one book that really changed my perspective was *Guns, Germs and Steel* by Jared Diamond. He has a very interesting take on what it is that initially helped different parts of the country to develop. I think when we think about economic development, a lot of times there's a lot of value judgment attached to how we view it and we blame different types of cultures or political structures. And he really gets down to the basics of what are the resources that are available in different parts of the world and how that affected their economic trajectories.

DEWS: The Brookings Cafeteria Podcast is the product of an amazing team of colleagues, starting with audio engineer Gaston Reboredo and producer Chris McKenna. Bill Finan, director of the Brookings Institution Press does the book interviews and Lizette Baylor and Eric Abalahin provide design and web support. Our intern this fall is Eowyn Fain.

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