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WEBINAR

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HOW CORONAVIRUS IS CHANGING POLITICS AND PUBLIC OPINION

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MS. REYNOLDS: Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for joining us. My name is Molly Reynolds, I'm a senior fellow in Governance Studies at Brookings. I'm happy to welcome you all today to join us for this conversation on the 2020 election.

Originally we would have been witnessing today the third day of the Democratic National Convention in Milwaukee, but instead we are all tuning into this discussion remotely. And much of the Democratic National Convention, when it does happen, will be conducted similarly. The format for the Republican Convention remains in some flux. The New York Times reported this week that some Republican officials, House members and Senators, do not plan to attend the event planned for next month in Jacksonville.

These consequences for the conventions are certainly not the only ones that the COVID-19 pandemic has had for the 2020 election. In the United States, in addition, the nation has seen widespread protests over the last month or so, structural racism in police departments and beyond.

Today, I'm lucky to be here with three of my outstanding Brookings colleagues to discuss how both of these historic events have shaped and will shape the coming election. By brief way of introduction, I am joined today by my colleagues Camille Busette, who is a senior fellow in the Economic Studies, Governance Studies, and Metropolitan Policy Programs at Brookings and the director of our Race, Prosperity, and Inclusion Initiative, John Hudak, who is a senior fellow in Governance Studies and the Deputy Director of the Center for Effective Public Management, as well as Elaine Kamarck, who is also a Senior Fellow in Governance Studies and the Founding Director for the Center for Effective Public Management.

We will start by having some conversation among the four of us and then later we will turn to questions from the audience. You viewers can submit questions for the speaker by emailing either Events@Brookings.edu or via Twitter using the handle @BrookingsGov or with #Election2020.

So to start off our conversation today, I'd like to hear each of my colleagues' thoughts on kind of what you think the biggest consequence so far of COVID and of the recent protests have had on

the 2020 elections.

So, Elaine, why don't we start with you? Elaine, I think you are still muted.

MS. KAMARCK: Hi. Sorry about that.

It has moved the 2020 election along at a rate that I can tell you I haven't seen before in my lifetime, and I've covered and been involved in a lot of presidential elections. I think that the combination of the poor response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the unempathetic response to the killing and police brutality that we've seen and the protests have really hurt the incumbent president. And Donald Trump has been pretty much in free fall since about April. There's steady downward movement.

I also think that we need to remember that presidential elections –- not just in the United States but around the world –- elections are about incumbents, they're about the head of state. And therefore Donald Trump's inability to react to these two crises, the health crisis and the race crisis, I think have been hurting him badly, and Joe Biden has been the beneficiary of that. So we now see a race that I think many of us didn't imagine we'd see, certainly last year at this time, where Biden holds a substantial lead nationally over the president and holds a lead that is outside the margin of error in a couple of key states. So it's been a rapid and dramatic impact on the election.

MS. REYNOLDS: Thanks, Elaine.

Camille, what would you say for you has been kind of the biggest consequence of these particular events for the 2020 race so far?

MS. BUSETTE: Well, thanks, Molly.

I certainly would agree with Elaine's take on this and I would say that this election is going to be all about –- 100 percent about Donald Trump, 100 percent about his inability to execute competently around the COVID-19 pandemic and also his completely unempathetic response to the killing of George Floyd and other killings in the subsequent protests. So I think it's 100 percent about him.

What I mean by that is I think now it has set into –- you know, COVID-19, his incompetent response, has set into play a number of things that we didn't think were going to be in play when we first started, right. So I think the Senate now is really up for grabs. And I think that is a direct –- you know,

that is a direct result of the fact that we're deep into the COVID-19 epidemic without a national plan and that we have a leader who's completely unsympathetic to the voices of protesters. So I think that's number one.

Number two is that I think it's really galvanized these –- particularly the George Floyd murder has galvanized young people, so I think there's going to just be a lot more activity and turnout for young people. And I also think that, in general, turnout is going to be huge, because this is really about defeating Donald Trump. It's not really about electing Joe Biden. Because I think basically at this point any Democrat would have benefitted from this set of circumstances.

MS. REYNOLDS: So I'll go to John in a second, but I just want to say that for me, as someone who pays attention to the U.S. Congress, I completely agree with you, Camille. To me the biggest change over the past several months, as a result of –- especially of I think Donald Trump's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic is this sort of widening of the Senate map that we've seen. So at the beginning of the year I would have said that the Democrats had maybe four meaningful pick up opportunities in the Senate, the seat in Arizona that's currently held by Martha McSally, the seat in Colorado currently held Corey Gardner, and then sort of coming in behind them, the Susan Collins' seat in Maine and the Tom Tillis seat in North Carolina. Democrats are defending the seat in Alabama that Doug Jones currently has. So at that point, if Democrats –- you know, again, looking at how I would have –- what I would have said about things in January, if Democrats have had a really good night, that would have been four pick ups. The loss in Alabama would have put them at a 50-50 tie. Now I think that it looks like Democrats really have meaningful potential pick up opportunities in Iowa and in Montana, in the latter case in part because Steve Daines –- excuse me, Steve Bullock, popular former governor, is getting in the race.

And so the thing that I would remind folks as we think about particularly the Senate map going into 2020 is that we've seen a really big decline in recent elections in ticket splitting. So in 2016 is the first time since we started popularly electing senators in the early 20th century that every state that had a senate race sent a senator to Washington from the same party as the state awarded its electoral

votes. So as we look at these sort of numbers for –- these polling numbers for Joe Biden in some of these swing states with senate races, we I think should remember that in a lot of cases that's going to have really important implications for some of these –- particularly these Senate races.

So I'll turn now to John and just ask the same question I posed to Elaine and Camille to start, John, which is to say what do you think the biggest consequences of these recent events has been for the 2020 election so far?

MR. HUDAK: So I agree with everything that everyone has said, and I want to build a bit on what Camille and Elaine were mentioning about the transformation of this race. I agree that this is a referendum on the President. Most presidents running for reelection find that race to be a referendum on him. But what has also happened at the same time is the change in the physical dynamics of this race, the quarantines, the lock downs that are happening, has meant one important thing that simultaneously hurts the President and helps Joe Biden, and that is that this is going to be a race that is far less about performance.

And by that I mean sort of the physical on stage performance, not performance of doing the job, but just how good of a show can you put on. That is going to be naturally muted. And what's going to be elevated is an election where voters have to look at the candidates and think about the ideas more than the show that's getting put on in front of them. And putting on a show is Donald Trump's strong suit. And if he's unable to do that in an effective way, it naturally hurts what is one of his real political talents. If it becomes a clash of ideas, obviously the President and Joe Biden are very different on what they believe about policy, but we have a president who's a few months away from a reelection who still can't answer the question about why he wants to be reelected and what he wants to do in his second term. And if that's the case, if that's all candidates have to compare, it's going to be something that's helpful to Mr. Biden.

Now, that said, one issue that obviously is being elevated right now is criminal justice reform, social justice, racial equity. These are all areas that Vice President Biden has a mixed record on in the past. He has taken positions, he has voted on legislation, he has authored legislation that now

seems extraordinarily out of touch with where the Democratic Party is. And so it's really going to push I think both the President and Mr. Biden to think more genuinely about what direction this country needs to go in with regard to those issues. And both candidates have a lot to make up from their past. And the candidate who is able to do that I think is really going to connect not just with black and brown voters, but with an increasing number of white voters who are looking at issues around race and having genuine empathy and sympathy in ways that we really haven't seen in modern polling.

MS. REYNOLDS: Thanks, John.

So this is a really interesting point that you bring out, which is what will these recent events mean, not just for the overall shape of the race, but for kind of how the campaign is conducted. So, you know, there's been made –- President Trump likes to say that Joe Biden is running for president from his basement, and these questions about, you know, we have a sense of how a modern presidential campaign unfolds, but that's going to look really different this year.

So what are some ways that we think that that piece is going to play out, whether it be lack of conventions, like I mentioned at the top, or other elements of the campaign itself?

MS. KAMARCK: I'll take the convention piece of it to start with.

MS. REYNOLDS: Thanks, Elaine.

MS. KAMARCK: I think that the Democratic Convention being basically a digital virtual convention was not just a good move because of the pandemic, and we can see that in contrast to the Republican Convention. Every day there's another Republican, you know, elected official who says no, I'm not going to the convention. So I think it was a good move in terms of health and safety, but it also was in a piece of something that had been happening for a much longer period of time, which is that conventions had become a little bit obsolete and starting at 7:00 o'clock precisely or 8:00 o'clock precisely on East Coast time, depending on where they were geographically, these conventions are a television show. That's what they've been. They've been produced for television, they look to get the highest ratings, people do tune in for an hour just to see the nominee, see the vice presidential candidate, see a key note, watch the roll call, et cetera. So it has been moving in that way anyway. And now what we find

is that in the –- because of the pandemic, at least the Democrats are going to have what I hope will be a produced, well produced television evening to introduce their candidates to America.

MS. REYNOLDS: Thanks, Elaine.

Camille, I think you wanted to come in on some of the questions that I asked.

MS. BUSETTE: Yes. I wanted to just talk a little bit about this issue of race and social justice and how –- I'm just building off of John's comment, that how this is going to be complicated to handle for each of these presidential candidates. And one thing I just wanted to mention is that I do think that in some ways Joe Biden has a bit of an advantage. And the reason I say that, although his record is indeed mixed, is that he –- with an older black constituency he is considered a good and safe candidate who will safeguard their interests. And for other people, who are a little bit more conservative, both more conservative Democrats as well as Republicans who are going to peel off from Trump, he also seems like a safe bet. And that mixed record could work for him, because he isn't the kind of person who is going to embrace something like defund the police or reparations, you know, the more I would say the kinds of policies that are being embraced on the left most wing of the party. So he seems safe in a way and yet seems as though he has some knowledge of where we are currently and kind of can plug into that. And I think Trump, at least as of last night, has not demonstrated that he actually is in tune with the zeitgeist of the moment.

MS. REYNOLDS: Yeah, I mean I think –-

MR. HUDAK: If I could build on that quickly –-

MS. REYNOLDS: Yeah, go ahead.

MR. HUDAK: I was going to say I agree with Camille. And one of the –- sort of in a hypothetical world, the president could have stayed more silent about his views on race over the past several weeks or taken a different tack and really focused on his helping pass and then sign the First Step Act, talk about what black and Latino unemployment was looking like before the recession, it was the gains in jobs in those groups -- things that he has talked about in the past. And the finest moment for him to focus on those issues in particular has been over the past few weeks, and instead he has gone in

a very different direction in a way that I think really stomps on what were some legitimate achievements within this Administration with regard to issues relevant to the conversation today. And it's a lot like what happened in 2018 when Speaker Ryan and Leader McConnell went to the president and said, listen, what you need to do is talk about the economy and only talk about the economy. At every rally you give, talk about the economy. And instead he talked about immigration. And the president taking his eye off of his own achievements with regard to the story that is the center of that news cycle really diminishes what he can do. And if anything, he has set himself so far back with communities of color given his rhetoric over the past couple of days, that any ability to challenge Joe Biden on issues around criminal justice and race, which, as Camille said and as I mentioned before, there are weaknesses there for Biden that can be hit on. And certainly that happened in the Democratic primary. Any attempt by the president to do that now is disingenuous. And I think the ad we saw come out this week just –- it looked like it didn't fit given the president's own rhetoric.

MS. REYNOLDS: Yeah, I mean I think one thing that's for me important to kind of think about about Vice President Biden in this context is the degree to which he over the course of his political career has more or less been in the middle of the Democratic Party on most issues, and that the real question is kind of how has the Party moved over time.

So some of the votes that, John, you were mentioning that he cast when he was in the Senate seemed perhaps out of step with the Party now, but they were more or less mainstream positions for a Democrat to take when he took them. And so now as the Party has moved somewhat to the left on some of these issues, will his response be to himself kind of move to the left? I think we've seen that actually over the past couple of days with some of his statements and plans around climate change and how he would propose to address that in the Oval Office.

But I want to come back to John for a second and ask a question about polling. So I think that one consequence of the change in the way the campaign is being conducted –- and, Elaine, you touched on this before about we won't have the same produced show of the convention to watch and help kind of set sort of the narrative for the campaign, that I think people are paying perhaps even more

attention to polling. And so, John, I'm curious what you think about kind of the place of polling in the race right now, going forward. What lessons might we have learned, not have learned from2016, what lessons should we have learned? That sort of thing.

MR. HUDAK: Sure. Thanks, Molly.

So one of the places to start when talking about how to think of polling this year is first to have an honest conversation about polling from 2016. The reality with regard to national polling in 2016 was that it was quite accurate. The final polls suggested that nationally Clinton would win by three or four points, and she won the popular vote by about three points. When you look at the state level, there are a couple of exceptions to this. Wisconsin is certainly one and Ohio is another where the polls didn't really perform well, that the rolling average was pretty far outside of the margin of error. But with the rest of the states, something that happens in presidential elections –- I won't say always, but certainly with some regularity –- is that polls break in a certain direction, voting breaks in a certain direction. And a lot of states broke in the direction of Donald Trump on election night in 2016, often times moving from support for Clinton to support for Trump, but typically within the margin of error.

And so I think anyone, particularly among Republicans, who say polls aren't worth anything, just look at 2016, (a) isn't really appreciating what actually happened in 2016 and (b) puts themselves in jeopardy because the campaign that refuses to look at polls is probably a campaign that's going to come up a bit short. And so, you know, that's sort of the starting point.

Next we have to look at what the performance between Clinton and '16 and Biden and '20 looks like. And while Clinton was ahead for most of the race in 2016 in polling nationally, if many swing states, Biden is far outperforming what Clinton was doing for that entire election season. And so to say well Hillary was up in 2016, so Biden –- we can't really put much stock in Biden, really underestimates just how large Biden's lead is this close to an election against a sitting president.

And then the third thing we need to think about is likability. And a lot of Americans like Joe Biden, or at least they don't strongly dislike Joe Biden. Like Camille said, among older black voters, he is seen as, you know, a sure thing, an ally, someone who is going to be there for them. It's true for a

lot of blue collar voters in the northeast, in the rust belt. They know Joe Biden speaks their language. And so Donald Trump is running against a very different Democratic candidate in the eyes of Americans with regard to likability. Now, whether you disagree with that, whether there should be a likability gap, we know there is one between Biden and where Clinton was four years ago. And that all creates a scenario which the structures around what we're thinking about happening within American politics are pretty well reflected in the polls. And that is an unpopular president has been getting less popular and a more likable Democratic candidate is doing better in the polls nationally and doing better in the polls in the swing states. And what that should telegraph to the President's reelection campaign is we need a dramatic change from what we're doing, but we haven't seen that dramatic change.

MS. REYNOLDS: Thanks, John.

So one thing you mentioned is that question of kind of Biden's likability and the degree to which certain populations are excited about Joe Biden and other populations less so. One thing we've seen a lot of talk of is whether Joe Biden will try to make a vice presidential selection that helps address perhaps some of this weaknesses among certain communities, whether it be communities of color, whether it be younger voters, whether it be kind of more progressive voters, what have you.

I'm curious to hear folks' thought on –- I won't make you predict who Biden is going to pick or even say who you think he should pick, but just as we over the next, you know, month or so watch this process unfold, what are some of the things that you think the Biden campaign should be thinking about as they think about a vice presidential pick would be?

MS. KAMARCK: Can I start and can I plug my book, Molly?

MS. REYNOLDS: Absolutely.

MS. KAMARCK: (Laughter) Okay. So I just wrote a short book, available at Brookings Press, called "Picking the Vice President". And one of the things I talk about is how the role of the vice president has really changed throughout history as a result of the changes in the nomination system. So we used to end up with vice presidents who were balancing the ticket, and that meant that inevitably they were different from the president, they came from a different reason, lots of north-south pairs, there were

lots of liberal-conservative or conservative-more conservative pairs. And that made for sometimes electoral success, but it also made for some pretty awkward governing pairs. I mean we literally have had vice presidents in this country who have gone into the Senate and gone thumbs down on votes that were supported by their president. Hard to believe that would happen today, but see the piece. There's lots of stories like that.

Beginning with Bill Clinton's choice of Al Gore in 1992, the model changed from a balancing model to a partnership model. And every single vice president who we've had since then has been chosen primarily for their partnership attributes, for their ability to help the president govern. Dick Cheney from Wyoming certainly was not a balancer. Joe Biden from Delaware, the Democratic state with only three electoral votes, was not a balancer. Mike Pence may be a little bit more, but he also was needed because Donald Trump had so little –- no governmental experience. And so I think that because Joe Biden himself was chosen to help Barack Obama govern, I think he's going to be looking for someone who can help him govern. He's in a lucky place these days, because he can also look for someone with gender and racial balance.

Twenty years ago, there simply were not a lot of women who you could think of as president. These days, we've got a nice group of Democratic women, many of whom are credible as president and could fit both the balancing and the partnership model. And so I think that we have to understand that there is something else going on here and it's relatively new in American history, the last 30 years or so.

MS. BUSETTE: I would agree with Elaine on all that. And, by the way, fantastic book and a great, great, great read.

MS. KAMARCK: Thank you.

MS. BUSETTE: So I definitely –- I'll also plug your book.

MS. KAMARCK: Thank you.

MS. BUSETTE: But I also think in addition to what you said, Elaine, I think there is an additional consideration which might make this a little bit trickier in some ways for Joe Biden. Certainly he

has excellent choices. Obviously most people think that he is going to pick a black woman as his running mate. Now, within that field, there are, you know –- the four candidates and four potential running mates are all pretty middle of the road. Some are a little more middle of the road than others. And I think one of the issues that he has to contend with is how –- and I don't know what his plans are for 2024, but assuming that this vice presidential pick is at the top of the ticket in 2024 and the Democratic Party is moving left, how do we pick somebody who is really positioned for success. And I think that is an open question, particularly given the field of Susan Rice, Kamala Harris, Val Demings, and the mayor of Atlanta, Keisha Lance Bottoms.

MR. HUDAK: So I'll add a little bit to this. I agree with what Camille said. I'll also plug Elaine's book. It's a really good read. There's absolutely no bias with Brookings scholars plugging Brookings scholar's books.

One of the fascinating parts about this choice of Mr. Biden to exclusively look at female candidates for a running mate is that it reminds me of another book and a line of research from a colleague of ours and who also teaches at the University of Virginia, Jen Lawless, who has written for years about the challenges that women face in running for office and getting elected and how that can create a shallower bench than among other groups, particularly among men. But one of the things that –- and of course Jen's work is as good as it gets on this topic –- but one of the things that has happened with the Biden campaign is it's really showing us the strength in terms of the number of women who are qualified for the job, who have experience that's relevant to what you would want from not just a vice president broadly, but from Joe Biden's running mate specifically. The names that Camille had mentioned I think you can't count out Elizabeth Warren –- as Molly said, reaching out to progressives and some younger voters. And certainly Tammy Duckworth's stock is rising for a variety of reasons. I think that would be a stellar choice among a series of stellar choices that Mr. Biden could pick. But it really shows that it's demonstrating I think for young women across America, but it's also demonstrating broadly about our politics that, yeah, there are a lot of women who are ready to go, ready to take over the reins of the presidency if necessary and also be groomed for running for president in their own right later on.

And, you know, I think you could also have that conversation with some really qualified women on the Republican side. That's not happening this year, but you could have that conversation too. And I think it was an important step for Mr. Biden to take, but I think the ripple effects of that choice and also the people who don't get chosen, but were at least vetted, really shows a lot about where American politics has moved to.

MS. REYNOLDS: Yeah, I mean I think to come back to Camille's point about the degree to which whoever is selected by the Biden campaign is really kind of elevated to be the front runner for the next Democratic nomination to president. I think it's also worth remembering that because Joe Biden himself has such a long career in American public life and in Washington, what he doesn't need to do is kind of fill that experience slot that, you know, Elaine referenced sort of Mike Pence doing a little bit for President Trump. And even I would argue Biden himself being selected by Barack Obama in part for his long experience in Washington, both on the foreign policy and the domestic policy side of the ledger.

And so that's not –- so Biden doesn't quite need to do the same thing. He doesn't, for example, need to find someone who has a lot of experience negotiating with Capitol Hill because they themselves haven't had a long Hill career. Biden himself brings that to the table. So he can kind of elevate some of these other considerations, whether it's exciting particular groups in the electorate, whether it's looking ahead to who the next standard-bearer for the Party is going to be, he can do that because he doesn't have some of the other holes that need to get filled.

I want to turn now –- so we've talked about kind of the big structural dynamics of the race, we've talked a little bit about how the campaign itself will be conducted, but I also want to talk a little bit about the consequences, particularly of COVID-19 for the conduct of the election itself.

And so I want to start with Elaine, because I know she's also done some work on this recently, on kind of how prepared states are to conduct elections. But just to give us a chance to talk about sort of what are some of the consequences of a global pandemic for how we actually do elections in this country.

MS. KAMARCK: Well, you know, it's so interesting because even before the pandemic

hit, there had been a trend in American voting, which was very interesting, which I certainly didn't know about it until I started to research this about a year ago, which is that in 2018 only 62 percent of Americans voted in person. In other words, in 2018, before a pandemic, 38 percent of Americans were voting early, they were voting absentee, or they were in one of those states where everybody votes –- essentially universal ballot states where everybody gets a ballot in the mail. And that trend was dramatically increasing from 1996, which was the year when –- the last year they had –- and basically everybody voted in person.

So this was going on despite the pandemic. Obviously when the pandemic hit people realized that they didn't really want to go into a school hall, school auditorium with a couple hundred other strangers and stand in line and vote, that that was obviously dangerous. And so, as we've seen in the primaries, there's been a move towards absentee balloting and towards basically mail in balloting.

So what several of my former Harvard students and I did is we sat down and we looked at every state and we looked at how easy it was or was not to vote during a pandemic, meaning to vote remotely. And we basically did something a lot of people have fun with, we graded every state from A, B, C, D, and F in terms of the ease of voting. And I think that that can be seen on the Brookings website. You can go to the website and look at it and look at the various states. All our data is there so you can argue with us about the data and go through the data.

But the important thing here is twofold. One is that states do need to make this easy to do and they need to educate voters on how to do it. But the second, and this we've learned from the primaries, is states still need to provide in person voting, particularly those states that are doing this for the first time. In Oregon they've been voting by mail for 20 years. You know, they don't have scandals, they don't have corruption, they don't have confusion, et cetera. But in states that are making this big leap, you need a fail-safe method, you need a way that if the ballot doesn't come to your house, you could still go to a polling place. And I think that's what a lot of places like the District of Columbia, Maryland, Philadelphia –- I think what they learned in the primaries was, yes, even though you make a big push to have absentee ballots, you still do need to have –- maybe not quite as many individual polling

places, but you still need to have a lot of in person polling places because, you know, no matter how carefully we plan, stuff happens.

MS. REYNOLDS: Yeah, so on this question of sort of retaining in person voting options, we saw a lot of –- at least initial press reports during some recent primaries about kind of where states were choosing to keep having polling places versus where they were closing them.

Camille, I know that this –- there's been a big conversation about whether states are preserving opportunities for people's vote in person in communities of color. What are some things that we should be thinking about in that context as we look towards November?

MS. BUSETTE: Yeah, that's a great question. And just building on what Elaine said, I mean it's very clear that there were some fairly disastrous experiences, I would say particularly in Georgia, but here in the District as well and a few other places where people were waiting four to five hours to cast their ballots, which, you know, even though this might not be the case, it certainly appears to be one of the ways in which you can suppress the vote among communities of color. And I know that the sort of chatter is that among voters of color that they will absolutely not stand for that, that they are going to be prepared to stand there for seven or eight hours, but they are going to cast their votes.

And so it does not reflect well on the authorities that have these early primaries to be in a situation where large lines are forming, people are there for hours, and they have very few responses to alleviating those lines. So I'm sure they do not want that to be the story, and if it is, I'm sure there will be a lot of contestation of the results beyond what we would normally see.

Elaine, I think it would be interesting for you to commend on when we might actually get results, even if everything is executed perfectly and no one is waiting on line for many, many hours.

MS. KAMARCK: Boy, it's going to be probably –- if it's close, it's probably going to be a full week at least. We did in this scoring, look at states and whether or not the time limit during which you could get a ballot and have it be counted. And some states, a lot of states fall within Election Day and five days after the election, other states fall from Election Day to ten days after the election. So you could imagine an awful lot of counting going on.

The states really need to up their game here. You saw what happened –- I think –- and particularly affected communities of color in the primaries, is states got this enormous influx of requests for absentee ballots and said oh, great, well, we can spend our money on absentee ballots instead of on polling places. And they closed too many polling places. And sometimes they'd have like one in a county and you saw these terribly long lines. Baltimore, by the way, and Philadelphia were other places where African American community was adversely impacted.

So the states now have a big challenge. They have got to accommodate the absentee ballot requests and they have got to recruit poll workers and keep enough polls open. And the problem with that, of course, is that traditionally poll workers are retired people, they're people age 65 and over. They are the very age group that does not want to be facing the –- sitting there in a closed place facing the public for eight to ten hours a day. So there's been some attempts in Congress –- they haven't been successful –- there have been some attempts in Congress to actually provide some money to encourage young people to get trained and become poll workers, and then we can keep more polls open. But it's a big, big problem because –- and partially because of this we're going through a more –- we've been going through a gradual transition to voting absentee, now we're going through a very dramatic transition and a lot of things can go wrong, which is why we really need to make sure we keep polling places open.

MR. HUDAK: And just quickly, to add to what Camille and Elaine said, this can really become a vehicle for voter suppression, as Camille noted and as we've seen play out in places like Milwaukee, in places like Louisville and elsewhere. I think it also suggests just how narrow sighted the Shelby County decision was in 2013 and the challenges that exist at the state level to combat what is unfortunately a very nimble ability of some people to suppress the vote in some areas. The ability for vote suppressors to adapt is –- I wish that secretaries of state were necessarily that nimble or that other voting rights groups were that nimble, but their ability to use a pandemic to advance an unfortunate cause is playing out in real time in front of us. And if something serious isn't addressed with it, it's certainly going to both play out in real time during the November election and the early vote before it, and also have an impact on outcomes in races from dog catcher to president.

MS. BUSETTE: Yeah. You know, one quick thing about that is there's some research that shows that when you move polling places –- so if you close and then obviously people have to go to a different polling place, it can actually suppress turnout by about 2 percent. And if you start, you know, adding that up, that can be thoroughly serious.

But the other issue I think that is posed by having a lot of absentee ballots and mail in ballots is what happens when these ballots are counted, right. And it would be great if every single county and every single state had an unblemished record around counting, but counting it turns out is also an issue and an area where suppression can potentially happen. And so that I think opens up a whole new can of worms for litigation, et cetera.

MS. KAMARCK: You know, the last stimulus bill –- let me just point out –- had $400 million in it to aid to states for their election operations. And the states really need money, because, for instance, for counting they just need a lot more scanners, they just need a lot more equipment, et cetera, because they're going to be counting a number of ballots that's unprecedented. So if we ever do get another stimulus bill, which we may, hopefully there will be some more money in there for states. And it's got to happen pretty soon, because we're looking at November and states need to really ramp up their game in order to be able to county quickly in November.

Sorry, John, you were going to say something.

MR. HUDAK: Well, I was going to say one of the real benefits of your scorecard is that there are some states that perform well and you'd expect them to and some states that perform poorly and you'd expect them to. But there are some surprise states in there –- Connecticut with a really low score relative to its neighbor. That looking through that and understanding not only does voter suppression happen at the state level, but it can really happen at the local level, as Camille was discussing.

And so I think some people have the idea that oh well, we have a governor who's in favor of voting rights or we have a legislature that's in favor of voting rights, so we don't have to worry about voter suppression. Well, you might not have to worry about it in the same way that another state might,

but given the state and local nature of voting and vote counting, that is not a real necessary protection against suppression efforts.

MS. REYNOLDS: We'll turn to Q&A in a second, but one thing we haven't really talked about at all, but that John's comments make me think of, is that in addition to trying to adapt the conduct of our elections to a pandemic, we also have lots of things about the conduct of elections and the security of elections that came up in 2016 that we've only sort of addressed in the intervening 4 years. And that, you know, one of the –- you know, John was just talking about sort of variation across states and one of both the greatest benefits and the greatest pitfalls of the American electoral system is how decentralized it is, the degree to which it's really hard to manipulate a national election because of how decentralized our election operations are, but it's also really hard to make it run smoothly because of how decentralized they are.

So I'm going to pose some questions now that have come in. And I'm going to start with one that came in in advance from Bruce Niesmith (phonetic), who asks –- and I think this is a great question –- basically what could change the subject, is there something that could change the subject? And I rephrased it to kind of replace COVID on the agenda and, you know, make the election about something else. Does anyone think that could happen? Kind of what do we think might rise to that level, if anything, in the next couple of months?

MS. KAMARCK: One easy one –- a terrorist attack. A terrorist attack would change the conversation. And one of the things that went under the radar because it happened in the midst of the pandemic and George Floyd and the protests, is that Trump at the last minute torpedoed the bill that would reinstate the FISA courts and the FISA process. Well, FISA is one of the ways that we watch terrorists around the world. So just to add to the problems that he's given us, we now have the problem that the FISA legislation has not been renewed, there is ambiguity about whether or not it can proceed to, you know, do what it's supposed to do. And we very well could have made ourselves more vulnerable. And that I think would certainly change the conversation.

MS. BUSETTE: You know, I also –-

MR. HUDAK: Yeah, it's hard –-

MS. BUSETTE: Go ahead, John. Go ahead.

MR. HUDAK: I was just going to say it's hard to imagine something that becomes a bigger domestic story than what we're currently dealing with, but, yeah, Elaine, terrorism is one. I think also another serious destabilizing international incident, one of our allies getting invaded, or something to that effect that could suddenly benefit an incumbent president who is then on the world state, hopefully acting presidential and dealing with some sort of serious incursion like that. But, yeah, short of that, it's hard for me to guess anything else.

MS. BUSETTE: I mean I would add to those two. I would say a real drop off in the economy and some really big firms having to do massive layoffs. That will shift the conversation I think fairly drastically. And so then you'll just be talking about COVID and a pretty deep recession.

And so right now I think people are very hopeful that, you know, at some point in the near future, people are going to have to get their jobs back and a lot of companies are going to start back up and, you know, it's just going to be a momentary kind of downturn. But I actually think there's a pretty good chance that we could see some pretty catastrophic economic effects, and then that will be a dominant theme as well.

MS. REYNOLDS: I think on Camille's point, unlike the sort of issues that John and Elaine have raised with their kind of exogenous we can't really predict them, might well come from outside our borders, to your point Camille, the sort of additional economic pain that Americans may feel as a result of the pandemic and how that would affect the election. That's not exogenous, that we can do something about.

And I'll remind folks that we're about two weeks away from the expiration of the supplemental unemployment insurance benefits that congress provided back in March. So there are real things congress could do, you know, working with the White House to try to address some of that potential coming economic pain, aid to states and local governments, all sorts of things. And so that's not kind of an unknown, that's a –- someone mentioned –- I guess Elaine mentioned Dick Cheney before, but

she used a Donald Rumsfeld expression –- that's a known known. We know what congress could do, we know what might happen if congress doesn't do something. And so thinking about kind of what happens over the next couple of weeks even in congress, it's having real affects on the economy going forward.

Another question that I'll pose that's coming from Janice is what about the debates? You know, when we were talking about the conduct of the campaign, we didn't talk about the debates at all. But so sort of what about the debates? How might former Vice President Biden prepare to debate President Trump? What role do we think the debates might play, might they play a sort of lesser role in this moment, a greater role given that there aren't other kinds of campaign activity happening, that sort of thing?

MS. BUSETTE: Well, I'll start off by just saying that I think this is going to be fascinating. And the reason I say that is, as John pointed out, you know, people are now really going to be focusing more on –- less on performance and more on actual policy issues. And I think we know what Donald Trump's playbook is at this point. And there are many, many ways in which that could go very, very badly for the President. I think Joe Biden just in general is a little bit more disciplined in debate format and I think at a moment where we're in the middle of, you know, perhaps a pretty severe economic downturn and COVID and worrying about social justice, somebody who seems as though they are very disciplined, have some plans, understand the concerns of people who have lost relatives to COVID or lost jobs or can't pay their rent or have lost loved ones due to the police violence, or suffering from just endemic racism, I think having a candidate that's a little bit more in command of those issues and a little bit more disciplined is likely to resonate more with voters than sort of the President's menu, which is really trying to tie the pandemic to China, Biden to China, and calls for racial justice to interfering with free speech, First Amendment rights.

MS. KAMARCK: Let me make a comment about debates, that they are really about this generic impression that the candidates give to the voters. And I'll go back to what John was talking about earlier, if Biden plays this right, you will see a debate where Biden is likable Uncle Joe, and Donald Trump is an angry blustering guy. And that's the election, okay. That is the election. I've lived through one of

these elections. It was Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter. And there was Ronald Reagan, who up until his debate with Jimmy Carter was thought to be –- because of his issue positions, was thought to be too radical, too dangerous, et cetera for America. And instead he was just avuncular and charming and there you go again, would say to Jimmy Carter. And he won in a landslide.

So I think that you have to step back and say in this race, you have Uncle Joe, who has many problems, has been around a long time, et cetera, but who is a very well loved man of those who've known him, and a lot of people have known him, and you have a guy who excels in division and bitterness and anger. And my money would be on the guy who's likable, not the guy who's trying to upset you and make you angry.

MR. HUDAK: You know, it's more than likability, Elaine, right. So this is going to be the first time that we would really see the candidates one on one, which typically that is true of the debate, but in this year where you're not seeing as many like back to back campaign rallies or head to head rallies where you're really being able to see them contrasted in fairly real time, this is going to be that first moment for a lot of voters in a way that we haven't had since the advent of real, you know, continuous campaigning, permanent campaigning, et cetera.

And so in moments like these –- and I think it's safe to assume we're probably going to have another spike in the fall unless a vaccine is found in time –- we're going to be in much of the same position in early November that we're in now. And in those moments –- you know, Americans looked to Barack Obama in Newtown or George Bush the night of 9-11, or Bill Clinton on the day of the Oklahoma City bombing. They're looking for someone who is empathetic, who is calming, who seems in control without, as you said, being blustery. And I think if Americans are looking to those debates for that type of leader, it's going to be really hard for Trump to fill that role. I don't know if he has it in him to be anything other than he is. And in some ways that's admirable. He's not going to be fake for the camera, but it's just not the president who most Americans are necessarily going to be looking for.

And stripping all that way, Joe Biden, if he comes to that debate in the way that he has come to other public events throughout his life, talking about serious issues in times of darkness in

America, he might be that candidate. And so just the optics of temperament, of how they carry themselves. You know, Americans were always going to have a choice, we just didn't know it was going to be a choice in the context of what we're having right now.

MS. REYNOLDS: I think for me it's also interesting to think about –- to go back to the conversation we were having before about the vice presidential selection –- what a VP debate might look like. You know, we have –- you know, we had the Tim Kaine-Mike Pence debate, the earlier vice presidential debates. But I think it was Camille who raised the question of there are a number of the folks who are said to be in the running to be the vice presidential pick who are folks who Americans don't necessarily know a lot about. And so the degree to which that event might also be important for introducing the Democrat's vice presidential pick to the country in an unconventional campaign where she –- I think I'm pretty comfortable saying –- will not necessarily have the other kinds of high profile exposures that we generally think of vice presidential picks as having had. That moment of the vice presidential debate I think will be consequential as well.

So I think that we are just about out of time. So I want to thank our panelists for joining us today, Camille and John and Elaine. And I want to thank all of you for joining us. So thank you.

MS. BUSETTE: Thank you all. It's been a great conversation.

MS. KAMARCK: Thank you, everyone, for joining in.

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