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DO PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES MATTER?
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P R O C E E D I N G S

MS. KAMARCK: Good morning. My name is Elaine Kamarck, a senior fellow here in governance studies at the Brookings Institution. And we're here today to talk about a very topical subject, do debates matter? We are only one day away from the first presidential debate in one of the most intense and consequential presidential elections in our lifetime. So as we get ready to watch tomorrow night we thought it would be good to do three things.

First, we'll look back a bit at some of debate history, some presidential debate history. Then, will turn to two experts on debates, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, the renowned scholar from the University of Pennsylvania, and one of the country's foremost experts on media and politics, and also founder of FactCheck.org.

And Russ Schriefer, an experienced Republican strategist and media consultant who has worked in many presidential campaigns including most recently the campaign of Mitt Romney in 2012.

In our third segment, we'll take questions from the audience. You can submit questions in the chat function, or via Twitter at #politics2020 or via events@brookings.edu.

Let's have a look at the very first presidential debate between Kennedy and Nixon. Here is a picture of them that shows, really, the problem. The very first televised debate was between these two would be in in 1960. And the idea didn't come from the candidates or the political parties, it came from the networks.

Kennedy quickly accepted. Nixon, against the advice of many, also accepted. It is now widely thought that 1960 debate was a disaster for Nixon, who had been sick, who made no effort to cover up his 5 o'clock shadow, and who looked bad compared to the tanned and rested Jack Kennedy. As you can see in these photographs, Nixon is wiping sweat from his face. Those who heard the debate on radio thought Nixon had won. Those who saw it on TV thought Kennedy had won.

The first presidential debate showed the incredible impact of television, and added a new requirement to presidential candidates; that they be telegenic. Then, 16 years passed between the first and the second debate in 1976 when President Gerald Ford agreed to debate Jimmy Carter. That debate, along with an amendment from the Communications Act solidified the tradition, and we have had debates ever since.

It is not surprising that some of the greatest debate moments ever were had by candidate, and then president, Ronald Reagan, a former movie actor whose comfort in front of the cameras is legendary. But going into the fall campaign in 1980, Reagan and Carter were neck and neck in the polls. In the following clip from Reagan's 1980 debate against President Jimmy Carter, he asked the question that many think was responsible for his subsequent landslide victory. "Are you better off today than you were four years ago?" Let's watch.

PRESIDENT REGAN (from video): Next Tuesday all of you will go to the polls, will stand there in the polling place and make a decision. I think when you make that decision, it might be well if you would ask yourself, are you better off than you were four years ago? Is it easier for you to go and buy things in the stores than it was four years ago? Is there more or less unemployment in the country than there was four years ago? Is America as respected throughout the world as it was? Do you feel that our security is as safe, that we're as strong as we were four years ago? And if you answer all of those questions yes, why then, I think your choice is very obvious as to whom you will vote for. If you don't agree, if you don't think that this course that we've been on for the last four years is what you would like to see us follow for the next four, then I could suggest another choice that you have.

MS. KAMARCK: Four years later President Reagan was running against Jimmy Carter's VP, Walter Mondale. In his first debate, things didn't go so well. Reagan appeared old and confused in a performance that led many to wonder if he was too old for the job. In his second debate, Reagan had a memorable come back. Watch.

MR. TREWHITT (from video): Mr. President, I want to raise an issue that I think has been lurking out there for two or three weeks and cast it specifically in national security terms. You already are the oldest President in history. And some of your staff say you were tired after your most recent encounter with Mr. Mondale. I recall yet that President Kennedy had to go for days on end with very little sleep during the Cuban missile crisis. Is there any doubt in your mind that you would be able to function in such circumstances?

PRESIDENT REGAN (from video): Not at all, Mr. Trehitt, and I want you to know that also I will not make age an issue of this campaign. I am not going to exploit, for political purposes, my opponent's youth and inexperience.

MS. KAMARCK: In 1988, Massachusetts Governor, Michael Dukakis was running against Vice President, H.W. Bush. It was a close race, but Dukakis wasn't helped when in the second debate he gave the following answer to Moderator Bernard Shaw. Watch and see if you can see what's missing there.

MR. SHAW (from video): Governor, if Kitty Dukakis were raped and murdered, would you favor an irrevocable death penalty for the killer?

GOVERNOR DUKAKIS (from video): No, I don't, Bernard. And I think you know that I've opposed the death penalty during all of my life. I don't see any evidence that it's a deterrent, and I think there are better and more effective ways to deal with violent crime. We've done so in my own state. And it's one of the reasons why we have had the biggest drop in crime of any industrial state in America; why we have the lowest murder rate of any industrial state in America.

MS. KAMARCK: Michael Dukakis wasn't the only presidential candidate to look insufficiently empathetic in a debate. Have a look at this photo from the 1992 debate when President Bush was caught checking his watch during an exchange with a woman who asked about the impact of the recession on him. Clinton's warm response came as a stark contrast bushes and seeming indifference.

Let's move on to the next photo which shows that sometimes you don't need to say anything to hurt your debate performance. During the 2000 debate between Vice President Al Gore and Texas Governor George W. Bush, Gore, thinking the camera was not on him, grimaced and sighed loudly while Bush was talking. Saturday Night Live made merciless fun of him as it has of many other politicians. And the satire, frankly, solidified the impression that Gore was just rude and arrogant.

And in his 2016 debate against Hillary Clinton Donald Trump repeatedly invaded her space, keeping the camera on him and his looming presence.

(No audio)

Hello everyone, can you hear me? I'm back. Okay. I'm back with our two distinguished panelists after that little tour of previous presidential debates and highlights from those. And so I thought I would start our discussion today with going to Russ.

Russ, as you know because you've been involved in them, as have I, right now -- right

now at this moment presumably both Trump and Biden are seriously involved in something called debate prep. And so what is debate prep? I mean, can you tell the audience what happens?

MR. SCHRIEFER: Well, what's interesting is that debate prep starts in, I would say this is in sort of a normal campaign, in a normal year, in normal times, debate prep starts often, literally months in advance, where the candidate will get his team together and start thinking about what questions could possibly be asked, and what answers would they want to put together and give.

I've been involved with a couple of debate preps where a candidate has literally had a notebook with a question, and then their answer specifically laid out in that notebook, and they want to memorize their answers specifically. That often start sometimes two, three months in advance.

I remember President Bush, particularly in the 2000 campaign, started quietly preparing for debates as early as June. And there was sort of secret debate prep sessions, a very, very small number of people to get him kind of prep for these debates because he realized that it was going to be a big deal, and something that he needed to perform well with.

As you get closer, you start to have back and forth sessions with staff where they will throw questions out and try to get you to think on your feet quickly, and take news of the day and headlines of the day and try to throw them at you. And then as you get to sort of the week before, you'll have, literally, mock debate sessions where you find someone to play your opponent.

Back with Mitt Romney in 2012 Rob Portman was playing Barack Obama and in the vice presidential debate Ted Olson was playing Joe Biden, which was very -- which was a great choice. It was very interesting.

And these mock debates can be as specific as you want. I mean, some of them could be just sort of around a kitchen table, or around a big conference table. But in some cases you literally recreate a set. You have the podiums exactly the distance that they're going to be, exactly the height. You try to create game day situations, you have someone to play the moderator in the debate, and you do a full run through for the hour or hour and a half, no breaks, no stops, and then come back and critique the performance afterwards.

Dick Cheney famously would want to have rehearsals at the exact same time the debate would be occurring so he would have -- if the debate was going to occur at 8:00 at night, he would want to

have a full run through at 8:00 at night. And in fact, there was probably no one as more disciplined in the way he approached debate prep than Vice President Cheney was in 2000 and 2004 campaign.

Romney was a little bit of both. He liked to kind of sit around and have conversations about his policy and potential answers to questions. But when it came time to have a game-day situation there was very, very serious mock debates moving into the sessions. That's what normally happens. Other candidates just want to sit around and kind of toss questions out. Other candidates, there's no discipline as to who's in the room. Our experience is that a small number of people is a much better debate than a large group.

I have been in debate sessions where there's 15 plus people in the room and as you know, anytime you get 15 or more people in a room with a presidential candidate, everybody has to be the smartest person in the room and everybody has to tell the candidate exactly how to answer the question, even if it's been already answered and it was answered well. So, you know, these wind up becoming not particularly productive. And I've seen candidates literally kick everybody out and then reestablish a debate practice maybe an hour later on a much smaller core of, like, maybe three or four people.

The other thing that we kind of like to start thinking about is then the kind of the strategy of the debate. You know, do you -- what kind of debate do you want? And we always kind of phrase it in terms of do you want a hot debate, or a cold debate?

A hot debate is when you want -- and generally if you're behind you might want to be very aggressive with your opponent. You might want to try to get your opponent to -- into a forced air, and unforced error. A cool debate, your head, you really don't want anything to happen. You want the news headlines the next day to the candidates debate, candidates mixed it up in Cleveland. I mean, those are the kind of headlines that cool debates kind of give you. Hot debates usually wind up having an outcome that can possibly change some votes even if it is just temporarily, and helps you with kind of the next 3 to 5 days in the new cycle moving forward.

MS. KAMARCK: I've also heard, over the years, that sometimes the presidential candidates, if the stand-in opponent is doing a really good job the candidate gets really mad at them and says -- because there's so in the role, right? Paul Begala did a -- played George Bush in the debate prep

I was in with Al Gore, and Al Gore got really mad at him. Like, Paul, how could you say these things to me. And of course, Paul was being George Bush so.

MR. SCHRIEFER: Absolutely. And they start -- we had a session once, I won't say who the candidate was, where we literally had to take a break and the candidate walked out of the room. And kind of had to start a half an hour later and everybody had to say they were sorry, and we apologize, and we kind of went back into it again.

MS. KAMARCK: Exactly.

Kathleen, you have written -- what you wrote a book about this a long time ago. You keep writing about media, and politics and communications. Where's the mastery of the media come in in a presidential debate?

MS. HALL JAMISON: A lot of people cite, as you did in your opening, the 1960 example where the presumption is there was an advantage for Nixon and radio and a disadvantage in television and the reverse for Kennedy. And one of the things we need to say from a scholar's standpoint is the study that shows that was so small in academic terms, so underpowered that it actually can't establish that.

But this is one of those things where intuitively, it just seems to be true, right? And you listen to the debates, and what you see is something that's important about how humans process information. The visuals through which we communicate, the demeanor that you can see, the tone of voice that you can hear are all communicating things beyond what you can see in the debate transcript.

And so to the extent that they are consistent, the message that says, competent, shares my values, trustworthy, that's beneficial for the candidate. Also, because television, and because debates in general are not heard, they are saying, and they're rarely just simply read, television media has the capacity to do you in as a candidate. So if you look at the dual screen, the split screening with Trump and with Clinton in 2016, Trump knows he's on camera in split screen. He's grimacing, he's nodding, he's scowling. He's drawing attention away from Hillary Clinton's answers. That's distracting. It's also refraining. You saw it inadvertently in the 1960 campaign when the camera cuts away to Nixon and Nixon is seen nodding as if he agrees with something that Kennedy is actually saying.

So to the extent that the medium is the vehicle through which we see the debate the

candidates and the producer's capacity to reframe what we're seeing and experiencing can affect how we perceive it in ways that would be very different, then for example, if we were just sitting in a live auditorium.

MS. KAMARCK: Let me ask both of you, and I guess I'll start with Kathleen and go to Russ. Do these debates matter? Can you pick -- if you had to pick a debate where it impacted -- it actual seemed to have an impact on the subsequent vote, which one would you pick? Or which two or three?

MS. HALL JAMISON: I'd pick '76 because the -- it's interesting and it's complex. The Frankel question before --

MS. KAMARCK: Explain for our viewers who might be younger than we are.

MS. HALL JAMISON: The press cast an answer by Gerald Ford in '76 to a question about soviet domination of Eastern Europe as a gaff. Max Frankel, the person who had raised the question and repeatedly followed it up, implied that it was a mistake on Ford's part. And people who watch the debate, before they saw the media commentary afterwards, made nothing of it. People who saw the media commentary after it perceived that it was problematic for Ford. Now, what that tells us is the media coverage of the debate, the media interpretation framing of the debate can have an effect which is quite different than exposure from the debate itself.

And the reason I would pick that as my example of a case in which it may have affected the outcome is for the plateaued in the polls for the period immediately after the debate when he held his ground and said I didn't make a mistake. He actually didn't. He articulated, although poorly, a policy that U.S. presidents had held over an extended period, that is, they refused to grant the Soviet Union's right to be in Eastern Europe. And that stance, saying that the Soviet union did not dominate was saying this is our policy, we won't grant it. And as the uprisings in Gdansk and as the outcomes in Poland ultimately illustrated, and Ford ultimately said, his position was vindicated historically. That is, what Ford was affirming was the rights of the peoples there to their own sovereignty.

So what you see is, he plateaued in the polls because he failed to apologize for something about which he wasn't wrong. That's potentially a media effect. But nonetheless, that plateauing when he was closing on Carter in the polls means that had he continued to close at the rate he was closing before that debate he would have won that election.

MS. KAMARCK: Russ, can you think of one?

MR. SCHRIEFER: Well again, I don't know if it was a complete game changer. I think I'll just talk about the one that I think I'm most familiar with; it was in 2012 where -- if you remember the first debate between Mitt Romney and President Obama, it was widely accepted that, you know, Obama did not bring his A game, nor his B game, and possibly brought his C game and Mitt was on fire. And Mitt had a very, very good, so debate and it really helped the campaign with momentum moving forward.

The second debate, eh, was kind of a push. The third debate with the foreign policy -- and that was the one where Obama attacks Romney for saying that Russia is our greatest geopolitical foe. And says, you know, the '60s called, they want their foreign-policy back. The '80s called, they want their foreign-policy back. At the time that was saying oh, Obama just really handed it to Romney, and he did. I mean, we saw the momentum, any momentum, that we had moving into that had stopped and it was the last debate, so the campaign was really set because these debates are kind of like --

There are a couple of big moments in campaigns; the conventions are one, nominating your vice president is another. And the debates are another where there is a set piece where from that maybe the dynamic in change. And maybe it doesn't change completely, the trajectory of the race, but what it does is it changes it for a while.

And being the last debate, that really changed the direction. It seemed that Obama had gotten the upper hand on Romney in that last debate, and for the next 2-1/2, 3 weeks, then we had Hurricane Sandy. It was just starting for Romney to kind of start going down. And our polling showed that we were pretty tight and very, very competitive through that point. And then after that, it just -- we just were never kind of winning in the states that we needed to win in. I mean never winning by enough anyway. So that would be the one that I would point to.

MS. KAMARCK: You know, it's interesting; there's -- we have seen presidents -- incumbent presidents, sometimes they screw up their first debate. And I wonder if it's a -- you know, we had Obama and we had Bush. I think you could say Gerald Ford; I think you could probably say Jimmy Carter in his debate against Regan.

MR. SCHRIEFER: Regan in '84.

MS. KAMARCK: And Regan in -- that's right. And Regan in '84. You know, I wonder

what that is; is it they feel like, look, I have so many other important things to do, why do I have to sit here in this room with my aides for two days and answer questions and, you know, they probably resist doing the sort of debate prep that they should be doing.

MR. SCHRIEFER: There's another -- it is very different when you're in a -- and as you know, when you're in a campaign for a long period with a candidate and maybe even a governor or a senator or even a vice president over months and months, there's an ability -- there's a familiarity that you have with them, a back and forth and a give and take. And all of a sudden, you're not sitting with the guy who's the candidate or the woman who's a candidate who might have been a senator or a governor, but you're now sitting across from the president of the United States and you're having to give the president of the United States, you know, criticize his or her -- his record.

MS. KAMARCK: Yeah.

MR. SCHRIEFER: In a way that they don't like to hear, that they're not used to hearing. And so you, you know, I think you pull your punches. I think punches are pulled. And all of a sudden they're facing a candidate now. And the entire job is to punch his opponent in the face as hard as he can, and I think that they they're just not used to taking a punch. But what you see is often they recover from that in a second during debates.

MS. KAMARCK: Yeah. Kathleen, what do you think is going on now in the debate about to become tomorrow night? I mean, what do you think, how do you think each campaign is preparing to kind of do something that will change a little bit of the course of this campaign? It's been remarkably stable. I have -- there's a chart in a recent Brookings piece that I did that shows that from February 1st, 2020 to September 22nd, this race just hasn't moved very much. And when you think of all the dramatic things that have happened in between; a pandemic, Black Lives Matter, conventions, et cetera. The stability of the race is astonishing. So what could they hope to accomplish tomorrow night?

MS. HALL JAMISON: Well, one of the things about the perspective that says it's remarkable stability is that's a national perspective, not a battleground state perspective.

MS. KAMARCK: Yeah, true.

MS. HALL JAMISON: So the campaign isn't actually happening practically. For practical purposes it's focused on, not simply battleground states, but battleground states where each campaign

thinks there are voters who can either be persuaded or mobilized and demobilized to their advantage. And so while we talk in national terms and a debate is aired nationally, for practical purpose, the question is how is it going to be perceived in the battleground states?

So the first question that one would ask in this environment is, what are the issues that matter most to those who are most persuadable in the battleground states that I need to mobilize voters up the mobilize voters it down, or shift voters. And to what extent can I accomplish that by changing the issues on which they focus to my advantage? And because the debate moderator of the first debate sets the topics, that means framing within topics already preset by Chris Wallace.

The second thing to remember is that we are in an environment in which the votes are being cast right now. In most states now, you are able to think not about what am I going to be doing on November 3rd, but when am I going to cast a ballot I either have, or have not received. Where in the past, debates couldn't really affect outcome because messaging usually creates short-term impacts, and the last debate happened long before a person actually cast a vote on election day.

We are now in an environment in which a ballot could be cast right after the debate, that is if you have it in hand and decide to fill it out that night. So we have a greater capacity to create debate impacted then we have in past years. There is a greater capacity in 2016 than in 2012, et cetera because we had more early voting. And were going to have historic levels of early voting this year.

So I would say, although the percent of undecideds on average looks substantially lower than 2016, the question becomes does the proximity of the debate to the voting decision increase the likelihood that those who will vote are going to be influenced by the content, and then from a candidate's perspective, are they addressing the issues that matter? That is, focusing on things that if you focus on it you're more likely to vote for that candidate, can shape those votes that are about to be cast.

MS. KAMARCK: You know, last night there was some pretty bombshell news which, I was watching the football game, so I wasn't paying much attention to it, I put my phone away and everything. And I woke up this morning to see that trumps tax returns are finally, finally out. How are they going to play that? I mean, will that become the first question tonight, Russ?

MR. SCHRIEFER: You would think so. You would think that Chris Wallace will asked that out-of-the-box. And you would think that, you know, President Trump will have an answer to that. I

mean they were talking about that a little bit yesterday. It's complicated, I'm a businessman and this is -- I have a lot of investments and this is what businessmen do. You know, President Truman, you start to -- the normal rules don't seem to apply. The normal rules of conduct, gravity and political rules don't seem to be part of it. He'll have an answer. Biden will attack him for it, they'll go back and forth on it, and it will come out kind of a wash, I think, at the end.

I think it will just depend upon, you know, are people, as Kathleen said, our people at home in Pennsylvania, and Michigan, and in Florida, are they going to feel offended in some way that they pay a lot more in taxes than the president of the United States does, who's theoretically a billionaire.

MS. KAMARCK: Yes.

MR. SCHRIEFER: And so it may not be in quite the back-and-forth that will see on the stage, but in kind of how it's framed in how people -- I mean, you really want to say not how they think about it, but really, truly how they feel about it? And I think to Kathleen's point, I think that there's a lot of voters who are having a ballot, and they're going to say okay, I've made up my mind, Biden's the guy. I made up my mind, Trump's the guy. I think those early deciders you know, might be influenced by the first debate to confirm their choice.

But I think there's going to be a bunch of people who are going to say, yeah, I'm going to wait for the second debate. I'll wait for that third debate. And then kind of the late deciders in this and people who'll be mailing in their ballots, you know, towards the last week when they feel like the game has been played. It's sort of like football. I mean, you know, do you call it the first quarter or the third quarter? You're probably watching the Patriots, so you always have to wait for the fourth quarter.

MS. KAMARCK: I always -- yes, as a Patriots fan, yes. But the other interesting thing about those late deciders, to the extent that there are many, is that those late deciders in a couple of campaigns really were impacted by the debates. A lot of people think that in 1980 Jimmy Carter had a shot at holding onto his presidency, but they schedule that debate so late in the game, it was October 29th. I think, maybe Kathleen, that was the latest presidential debate ever. And because it was so late, and because Ronald Reagan managed to switch the narrative on himself and was not a scary warmonger but this nice avuncular man; that seems to have had a real impact on the subsequent election. I'm not sure that any of the other debates had that kind of clear-cut impact.

Kathleen, can you think of any that might have fallen in that category?

MS. HALL JAMISON: Well, one of the things that we look at is are you able to study it well enough to answer the question? So the difficulty historically has been how do you locate the audience that was going to watch the debate, and as a result, study it? And then, how do you look at the audience that was exposed to the press coverage afterwards and study it. And how do you find the electorate that both watch the debate and watched in the coverage afterwards? You can't parse those things out very readily.

And to the extent that the interpretation frames the debate, and you watch the debate through a channel that provides interpretation, it's very difficult to separate those. So whenever people asked the question can you know if, under what -- my answer is academically, we will never, I think, have a method underlying what it is we do to answer that with the kind of certainty that we can answer some of the kinds of questions.

We can save debate exposure does change attitudes that we have been able to track. But then, you're studying how people project that they vote based on that. You don't know how they actually voted. So, for example, in the book "Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President," which is now out in the second edition, I argue that those who watch the debate, the second and third debates compared to those who didn't watch the debates, when you're controlling for everything else, are more likely to say that Hillary Clinton says one thing in public and another in private.

In each of those debates and that issue was raised using Russian hacked, illegal gotten democratic content as the basis for the question. And in each case, that hacked content was taken out of context. Hillary Clinton did not tell Wall Street bankers I have a public and private position. Hillary Clinton did not say I stand for open trade and open borders. In the first case, she was talking about a Spielberg film. In the second case it was part of the sentence talking about a hemisphere, common market dealing with open trade, open borders, sometime in the future, and then the rest of the sentence talks about energy.

So we see in those two debates a changed perception of whether she says one thing and public and another in private; and those who have that changed perception say that they are more likely to vote for Donald Trump rather than Hillary Clinton. Now, notice all the inferences I have to go through

to say that debate as exposure appeared to change that attitude which should then projects to a different vote. I believe that mattered in a close election. Can I establish it conclusively? No.

MS. KAMARCK: And of course, one of the quickest ways to understand this is to say, in a close election everything matters.

MR. SCHRIEFER: It all counts.

MS. KAMARCK: And in a landslide, nothing matters. So were always trying to parse out what is it? What is it?

Before we take some audience questions I want to get from each of you, what's Trump got to do tomorrow night to try to catch up with Biden? And what does Biden have to do to hold onto what looks like a hold -- looks like a lead, and including in the battleground states because we've been seeing lots of polling in battleground states to. What's the goal? When the debate is over what headline do they want? Russ?

MR. SCHRIEFER: So I'll go back to my hot debate/cold debate analogy. I'm sure that if you're in Trump debate prep there saying we want a hot debate. You know you're good in hot. You do better -- you know, a cool sort of kind of sleepy Donald Trump showing up to a debate would not be good. He needs to be -- he's going to prosecute his case against Joe Biden. He's going to throw out -- my guess is he throws out, you know, his 40 year political career, his family, anything that he can think of to kind of try to rattle Biden because he wants to mix it up.

So the story becomes anything but Donald Trump and his taxes. Donald Trump and his -- and the corona virus. Make it about something else because you don't like the way the conversation is going, change it, kind of thing. He's going to want to be -- and he's a master of that. He does that probably better than anyone in changing the conversation. And wanting to try to kind of get by to chase him down that rabbit hole.

Biden, on the other hand, probably more on the side of a cooler debate. He wants to project himself as being a president. Project himself as kind of, you know, from his weaknesses coming out and stand up there for the period of time, and take the questions? Is he articulate? Is he able -- does he seem like he still has it at 77 years of age? I mean you look at those Reagan clips, and Reagan in '84, I believe he was 72 at the time?

MS. KAMARCK: Yeah.

MR. SCHRIEFER: And now, we have a candidate for president who's five years older than that. So my guess is that they want a cool debate. I don't think you're going to get a headline either way unless something unforeseen happens that is going to be determinative in any kind of big way. I think Trump supporters will think that their guy did well, I think Biden supporters will think that their guy did well. I think there will be a few people in the margin, you know, maybe sitting at home with a scorecard trying to figure out to vote for. But my guess is that they're going to -- that they still wait a little bit longer.

MS. HALL JAMISON: Let me reframe the question. I think that each candidate should want to ensure that voters do not vote based on misinformation about their actual positions. And I think we ought to want no voter to vote based on misinformation about positions. So on those things that are consequential to a vote, we want the debate to clarify so that people actually know what the candidates have done, and say they will do.

What that means is that deceptions about the extent to which, and who will be taxed by Joe Biden, needs to be clarified for Biden. It means defunding the police needs to be clarified. So you've got deceptions in the Trump ads about who will be taxed and the extent, and what he will do in relation to defunding and policing. He needs to clarify so that voters don't -- based on misperception.

On the Republican side, there's confusion about the Trump position on Social Security and Medicare that's being magnified in ads by the Democrats that are trying to increase the likelihood that you think, which is traditionally Democrats argue about Republicans, that Donald Trump in his second term will destroy Social Security and Medicare. So what you need to do from Donald Trump's standpoint is if that's not what he intends to do, clarify; make it really, really clear. Voters tend to be deceived by believing the things that they believe about a party, and not thinking critically and looking carefully at what's actually in the record.

So about Democrats we think they're going to increase taxes. So the deception will say more than they are, and all more people than they are, to a greater extent than they are.

We believe Republicans are going to not protect social programs as well. They'll cut the rate of increase in the usual terms, or in the Democratic phrasing of it, they'll actually cut the social programs. So the Republicans need to establish, when they do not have that intent, that they are not

going to do it. And what that means is that they also need to be on the record because one important function of debate is giving the mass audience a preview in the form of clear statements of what the candidate will do in governance. If a candidate says -- stands on the debate stage and says will not, then we take that as a national promise that he in this case will act on it as president. And so that clarity is important for a second reason. The first is not having misinformed voting.

But the second is that the electorate, as a whole, deserves to know how campaigning forecasts governance. And to the extent that it does, it indicates that we have a representative process that you are able to vote based on good information that yields an outcome whether you like it or not that you could have foreseen because the debate helps you build a context of understanding what the candidates would actually do.

The public doesn't realize the extent to which candidates for president try aggressively to keep their promises. When a candidate says I'm going to do it, says it clearly on a national stage, the likelihood that as president he will try, he may not be able to accomplish it because he may not have control of Congress, but he will try to accomplish that. And that makes debates important because they increase the learning and tying campaigning in governance.

MS. KAMARCK: You know, this reminds me, Kathleen, and I think those in this to you. One of the questions that's coming in from one of our viewers; and it relates to, of course, fact checking. And Kathleen, as many of you know, is the creator of FactCheck.org.

MS. HALL JAMISON: Co-founder. Brooks Jackson gets half the credit.

MS. KAMARCK: Okay. Sorry about that. Is there any way to introduce real-time fact checking of candidate responses for accuracy? Should this be considered?

Not you guys do some of that. Explain what you do and may be, could it be done even more real-time?

MS. HALL JAMISON: I'm going to take this and bounce it right to Russ. The one time that it was clearly done in a presidential debate in real time, it was done poorly. Candy Crowley inaccurately fact checked Romney. And that disadvantaged Romney, and that was unfair. One reason that we should minimize the likelihood that we do it on the fly is that it's very difficult and extemporaneous speech to lock down clearly what is said, and to get right what it is you're saying in response.

That doesn't mean that we can't anticipate what candidate will say because they can't actually iterate a whole lot of their past exceptions. Fact check in advance and have those statements up there available, particularly for those duels bringing, watching the fact checking screen as they're watching the debate to track. But I'm very leery about checking in real time because of that experience with the Romney/Obama debate. And I think Russ should give us some commentary about that.

MR. SCHRIEFER: Sure. I remember that, not particularly fondly. But it was -- but listen, you know, Governor Romney -- at the time Governor Romney was too much of a gentleman, and too much in the, kind of plays by the rules, kind of candidate. I think what you would say now though is that -- and we saw this in the debate -- the primary debates 2012 where, you know, Newt Gingrich goes after one Williams as a moderator and a questioner.

So if I'm Trump, if I'm Chris Wallace tomorrow night, and I decide that I'm going to step in and fact check Donald Trump, Trump isn't going to, like, disagree and say, oh, thank you Chris for reminding me of -- you know, I was wrong there. He's going to tag Chris Wallace. This is just another clear example of the fake news media putting their thumb on the scale. And this is exactly why can't listen to these people. You can't listen to this guy over here, listen to me. I know what I'm talking about.

So to fact check in real time I think becomes -- and particularly live by the moderator is just fraught with danger to just turn this into a two on one debate between the moderator, a Democratic candidate, and Donald Trump. And in some ways, Trump would like nothing more than to debate on the moderator because then he kind of leaves Biden off on the side. You know, kind of trying to figure out what to say.

So I think it's -- I don't know the answer to it. I think that, you know, Kathleen brings up a good point that having things that are prepackaged, by having things that are kind of immediately when the debate is over with to have things that are part of the span and the reporting afterwards. But you know real time, I think it's going to be very, very difficult.

MS. KAMARCK: That's really good. That's really good. Thank you.

Remember, questions can come in over the chat box or it can come in over Twitter. I do have a question from Nancy Kirk in the audience. How does body language affect the viewers? Affect the perception that the viewers have? Kathleen?

MS. HALL JAMISON: Largely, we interpret our candidate through a favorable lens and the candidate we oppose through an unfavorable one. So the -- when people frame questions in terms of what is the objective meaning of something? How do you create a universal context of understanding? It's just not the way communication works. So while I might look at Donald Trump moving in on Hillary Clinton's space, standing behind her, as he is an strong and competent. Alternatively, I might look at it as stalking.

MS. KAMARCK: Okay.

MS. HALL JAMISON: Now, I can tell you which of those perceptions is more likely to be a perception of the Democrat and which is more likely to be the perception of a Trump supporter. The cue has to be fairly clear in its own right and fairly telegraphic to have a universal meaning. There are moments in which you worry a lot about the interpretation that people put on things and as a result people start to see them through that interpretation of others.

That moment you showed where George Bush is looking at his watch is one of those. That is often interpreted as evidence that George Bush was just out of touch in the debate. Let me give you an alternative. Bill Clinton was talking at great length and he was looking down to find out when was Clinton going to end.

You also have the Kennedy/Nixon debates. There's a clock off to the side. Nixon looks off to the clock periodically. One interpretation is he's shifty-eyed. Another is he's looking off to the clock at the side. Nixon perspires profusely during the debates. That's genetic. That means that your ancestors way, way back married other ancestors way, way back who were prone to sweating under hot lights. And over time, that genetic pool of selectivity gave you someone who was more likely to perspire in hot lights. The idea that that suggested that he was under stress, and as a result wasn't handling it well, is simply -- runs in defiance of what we know about how biology works.

So the danger is that we take telegraphic cues to mean something that they don't or that we take the interpretation of someone else about what they mean uncritically or that we simply process through our own partisan lens and we don't see it for what it is. I try to set most of those things aside as a result to the extent possible because they're so fraught.

MR. SCHRIEFER: Now, if you take a look at -- you mentioned the Gore/Bush debate in

2000 where Gore was caught grimacing and sighing and stalking Bush. And there as that famous moment where Gore kind of approaches Bush and Bush looks at him, kind of nods his head, acknowledges him and kind of pushes him back. For years after that in debate it was like don't do what Al Gore did, don't do that. You know, the camera's always on you. Kind of look down, take notes, don't encroach upon your opponent.

In that same year, in 2000 there was the famous -- not on the presidential level but at the -- at a senate campaign. The famous debate between Rick Lazio and Hillary Clinton where Lazio gives Hilary a pledge to sign and walks over to the podium and kind of, you know, seems like he's hectoring her to kind of sign it, sign it. It seems clearly a bad moment for Lazio in that debate.

And then, in 2016 along comes Trump and literally breaks every single one of those rules.

MS. KAMARCK: Yes.

MR. SCHRIEFER: He's grimacing, he's sighing, he's making faces, he's talking over the person, he's stalking them and yet it doesn't seem -- you know, that seems to work for him. So -- and I think, you know, I think that what you say is -- I do think that viewers, we know how, more than anything to look. We may not know how to -- we may not read as much anymore. We may not analyze as much anymore but we are consumers of video, like, you know, never before. And generations younger than us are entirely consumers of video. And so they kind of know and they pick up video cues much, much -- you know, quite a bit, we all do and younger generations even more so. So I think -- and if you just feel comfortable, Trump seemed comfortable doing that.

And therefore, voters kind of look at that and say okay, he is who he is, and if you like him, you kind of like him because of that, not in spite of it.

MS. KAMARCK: You know, Hillary Clinton in an interview recently discussed that debate episode for a long time and discussed her, I don't know if you saw this Kathleen, nor not, discussed what was going on in her head. She knew he was looming behind her.

She felt it was a kind of threatening, inappropriate presence, but she never did know what to do. You know, should she have turned around and said, back off buddy? You know, get away from me? What are you doing? Or can I do something for you? It was interesting because when Al Gore

invaded George Bush's space George Bush sort of just looked at him and said, can I help? Didn't he say, can I help you?

MR. SCHRIEFER: Yeah, can I help you, buddy?

MS. KAMARCK: Yeah, can I help you, buddy? Which had the effect of pushing Gore away and stopping and making it look like Bush was standing up for himself. So it was an interesting moment that obviously Hillary Clinton is still wondering what she should have done.

MS. HALL JAMISON: But there's something else that's happening there. By virtue of Donald Trump doing that, he distracted Hillary Clinton. Part of her cognitive capacity is now dealing with the looming presence of a gigantic, potentially menacing male standing behind her.

MS. KAMARCK: Yeah.

MS. HALL JAMISON: Which means that she does not have all of the strategic resources available to focus on the audience member she's supposed to be answering. And so to the extent that you're giving cues to the audience member because you're responding to a question, he's actually accomplishing something. He's disadvantaging his opponent substantially which is why we ought to have rules that govern this, and the moderator ought to enforce those rules. The moderator ought have said, excuse me, I want to stop for a moment. Candidate Trump please get back over where you're supposed to be. Now, you know, Madam Secretary, let's take that question again.

Also, to the extent that the press becomes our way of seeing these things, the press displaces our ability to understand. Things have a little bit of short-term memory and then they disappear if we don't look with the long-term memory. Every minute that was spent talking about Trump sniffing through the debate -- remember Trump sniffed or snorts in microphones? Or Al Gore sighing was not a moment in the post-debate commentary that helped to clarify the candidates issue distinctions.

If we come out of these debates and the public that is subject to the cap on deductions of state and local taxes doesn't realize that there's a difference between these two candidates and what they would do about the deduction with state and local taxes, then that's a significant lapse in the journalism.

MS. KAMARCK: I get it.

MS. HALL JAMISON: So journalists, if you focus us on that, first we're not moving the issue knowledge we got into long-term memory. The important things that might matter to us in voting

aren't moving into long-term memory. Shame on you. But secondly, important time that you could spend focusing and reinforcing issue distinctions or indicating what wasn't asked and answered but to which you know an answer is also being squandered.

MS. KAMARCK: Well, we've got one final question here, but it's a doozy, and it comes from the audience. And the question is, have most of voters made up their minds for who to vote for, including the undecided voters, which is a really good question. If everybody made up their mind doing things matter? Russ?

MR. SCHRIEFER: So you know, Haley Barber used to have this -- we did some work for him, and he used to have this great phrase. He would say, tell me what the ballot test is among the undecideds. And what he meant by that was -- and you saw this four years ago, is that among those people who are unfavorable to both candidates, Trump won that battle. Trump won that number. So I want to take a look at who the undecideds are, and what is the (inaudible) of each of the candidates among the undecideds? And that pretty much gives me an idea of kind of where they may break on election day.

So listen, I think there's -- there are fewer and fewer undecideds. I think that there was a poll that came out recently that said that only 28, it was the lowest ever, only 28 percent of the electorate was looking to the debates to make a decision in this campaign, which was down, I think, at least 10 points over the last few years. Which means that the pool of undecideds is becoming smaller and smaller.

And I think what you're going to be wanting to look at is which candidate has a higher favorable, among those people who are undecideds, going into the last weeks in this campaign.

And as we see that I think that can be -- and then that, along with, you know, who's motivating their base, which is what this is all about? Is Donald Trump able to get, you know, higher numbers of white, noncollege educated voters in the Midwest and kind of bump that number up by a couple of points? Is Joe Biden able to get more African-American voters in the Philadelphia area out in order to win Pennsylvania? Those are the things that I think both of these campaigns are going to be looking at.

MS. KAMARCK: Kathleen?

MS. HALL JAMISON: Yeah. I mean tell me that you voted reliably in the past. Tell me that across that time you've always voted for a Republican, or you've always voted for a Democrat, and I don't need much more information other than whether you're going to vote. If you voted in the past, the likelihood you will is extremely high. People who are more susceptible to influence are those who aren't is tightly anchored to a party. They're not as tightly anchored to voting at all, and they're not as consistently voting for one party when they have across the past.

And to the extent that they feel ambivalence about both candidates, they're not already anchored in party, the question is are they going to vote at all? First question, and Russ is featuring that question. So can I mobilize or demobilize them to my advantage? And secondly, how do I increase the likelihood that they are focused on issues that matter to them on which my position is consistent with what they want a president to do, framed in a way that leads them to believe that I will act in their self-interest, and that I share their values.

If I can communicate those two things, among the pool that are susceptible, I'll increase the likelihood that the margin will tilt in my favor. Most people in the election are already decided in most elections, just out of the box. But you have capacities within those that aren't as anchored by party and are feeling ambivalence and don't have a solid history of voting a particular way. And not a solid history of voting in general to shape influence. And that's potentially where this matters.

Those people, however, are less likely to be viewing debates so therefore are likely to be influenced by whatever happens downstream of the debates in form of the memes, or the clips, or the things that circulate within their media spheres. It's important that mainstream news, to the extent that it can, break through that with good information about legitimate distinctions between the candidates (inaudible).

MS. KAMARCK: And it's true, after the debate tomorrow night, there won't be just the debate, there will be articles and clips and news stories and people sending things on Facebook about what was said in the debate, et cetera. There'll be an enormous amount of post-debate information going out there to try and affect the voters.

I want to thank Kathleen. You are a wonderful scholar, a prodigious scholar. You make me feel totally insecure, all the time when I just at the amount of stuff you can put out in a year. And of

course factcheck.org is doing a great job. Congratulations with that.

Russ, your list of candidates and your list of experience all over the country is truly overwhelming and I hope you have some good candidates this year too, because I know you always do, and you always do a great job for them.

And to our viewers, thank you very much for joining us and I hope that this little session will help you, if you choose, to join in tomorrow night and have a look at the first presidential debate. And maybe come back and tell us; does it matter? Thanks so much.

MR. SCHRIEFER: Thank you.

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