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WEBINAR

2021 ELECTIONS: RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. WILLIAMS: Good afternoon, and welcome to this Brookings Webinar. Election 2021 results and implications. We're set for jolts of lively insight from some of the nation's top political minds. My name is Juan Williams. I'm a Senior Political Analyst at Fox News and a Columnist with The Hill.com. I've served as an editorial writer and a White House correspondent for the Washington Post. I've hosted a talk show for NPR and I'm also the author of several books including *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years* and *Thurgood Marshall: American Revolutionary*.

So I'm going to be your moderator for today's terrific panel. And I'm going to introduce each of the panelists in greater detail in a moment. But you should all note, get ready because you're going to learn and listen to Amy Walter of The Cook Political Report, Chris Stirewalt of American Enterprise Institute, John Hudak, Deputy Director of the Center for Effective Public Management at Brookings Institution, and a woman who put together this panel, Elaine Kamarck who is Director of the Center for Effective Public Management at The Brookings Institution.

I'd like to remind the audience that they can submit questions via Twitter at #Election2021 or email events@brookings.edu. So let's get the party started.

Last Tuesday, we had an off-year election that rocked the political world. Republicans won the governor seat in Virginia as well as control of the legislature. In New Jersey, a democratic incumbent who was thought to be a sure win barely squeaked by with a narrow win and in Minneapolis, home of George Floyd, a police reform measure was turned down decisively and the mayor who opposed that measure was reelected handily.

On top of it all are worries about President Biden and disarray among Congressional Democrats. So what does it all mean? We're going to begin with each of our panelists offering two minutes of uninterrupted thoughts on their take on American politics. Then we'll have time for some cross talk among the panelists before opening it up you, the audience.

I want to get started with Amy Walter. Amy is the Publisher and Editor-in-Chief of The Cook Political Report where she provides analysis of issues, trends and events that shape U.S. politics.

She's a contributor to the PBS News Hour, provides weekly analysis for their popular Politics Monday segment. She's also a regular panelist on NBC's Meet the Press, CNN's Inside Politics and special report with Bret Baier on Fox and former political director of ABC News.

So Amy, you go first and I'm going to prompt you with a question. After last Tuesday is there anyway that you can see Democrats avoiding a disastrous midterm?

MS. WALTER: Thanks, Juan. Well, I've covered politics for quite some time and I won't tell you the exact number, but it's many years. And there's one thing that has been pretty true. It's that every election is unique, but to paraphrase Mark Twain, you know, history may not always repeat itself exactly, but it does tend to rhythm.

And this election, this '22 midterm election is shaping up to look like, quite frankly, the last four midterm elections where the party in power lost their House majority or their Senator majority or both. And the elements that were in place in those elections are in place this time. An unpopular president, right now President Biden's approval rating is somewhere around 43 percent.

If you look at where the last four midterm elections. You know, 2006, '10, '14 and '18. Every one of those presidents was sitting under 50 percent. Some closer to 45, some closer to 48. Trump, I think was at 44 or 43. All of them, of course in those years lost House, Senator or both. You have an enthusiasm gap.

Democrats turn out in Virginia at above the traditional midterm or what we can call an off year election is what Virginia has. But Republicans turned out in even bigger numbers. When I look at the percent of the vote or just the total -- the raw total of votes that Glenn Youngkin got. It was I think it's 85 percent of Trump's vote from the previous election. Eighty-five percent. That's impressive. Again, in an off, off year election.

Just to compare it with how this looked, let's say, in another kind of election, a midterm election in 2018, Kyrsten Sinema when she won that Senate race in Arizona, she had over 100 percent vote share compared to Hillary Clinton's 2016, okay?

The Republican did well too, but only got 90 percent of Trump's share. So McAuliffe

turned out a good chunk of voters over 50 percent. It was close to 65 percent of those voters who turned out for Biden, but it couldn't compare to the enthusiasm on the Republican side. And finally, it's independence, right? They've become sort of the barometer in our politics when the heat gets too hot. I'm mixing metaphors. I don't know a lot about -- sorry, meteorology.

But the point being when things get really hot. It's independents who they spike. And they tend to turn against the party in power because they see whatever the party in power is doing or not doing makes them pretty upset and they sour on the president. They vote in double digits -- by double digit margins for the party out of power.

Right now, President Biden's approval rating with independents is only in the mid-30s according to Gallup. That's basically where Trump was at this point and where Trump ended up in 2018. So all the signs on look really dangerous. The only difference, and we'll be getting into these. And there are a few differences this year compared to previous elections. At least those last four. It's a redistricting year, which, unfortunately for Democrats, it actually is more peril than upside for them.

We have for them we have different coalitions and voting patterns this election than we have in previous elections, right? Every electorate is different every year so doing sort of a deep dive on that, I think will be important in understanding who turns out traditionally in midterm elections especially now that Democrats are doing much better with white college educated voters who tend to be big or not big voters but consistent voters.

And then finally, there's the Trump factor, right? He wasn't much of a factor in Virginia or New Jersey. He was incredibly disciplined. That might not be so easy to pull off come 2022. So I will leave it at that and go onto the rest of the panel.

MR. WILLIAMS: Well, Amy, thanks. I think that's a great start and we appreciate it.

Up next, Chris Stirewalt. Chris is a Senior Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, AEI, where he focuses on voting trends, public opinion and American media. He's also a contributing editor and weekly columnist for the Dispatch. Before joining AEI, Chris was a political editor for Fox News Channel. At Fox, he helped coordinate political coverage across the network and specialized in on air

analysis of polls and voter trends. He's the author of *Every Man a King*, a colorful history of American populace.

Chris, let me prompt you with a question. How will Tuesday's outcomes at the poll change the strategies even the rhetoric of these two parties, Republican and Democrats?

MR. STIREWALT: Well, it depends on what they think happened.

MR. WILLIAMS: Exactly.

MR. STIREWALT: And there will be totally contradictory points of view about what actually happened and it will be hilarious.

But first, I should say it is very good to be with you, my friend. I miss you. And, Amy, it's so good to be with you. It's good to meet you, John. And, Elaine, I have admired your work from afar so thank you for putting this together. I'm a big fan.

So if you were to take the same point shift, the same average point shift from New Jersey and Virginia and apply it to the House. And the shift from four years. So we're talking here about not from the presidential, which is Amy just gave a master class on. These are your totally different electorates with different propensity voters.

But if we were to take the same shift and apply it to the midterms of four years ago, we would end up with a Republican gain of about 30 seats, right? If you were just to move that -- I forget what it is. It's 11.25 points. You would end up with the Republicans getting 51 percent or so of the national popular vote for the House which would set them up at about 242, 245 seats depending on redistricting. That's a lot of seats, right?

Now, it's not a lot of seats by the standards of 2010, which was double that. But that would be on par with what the Democrats did in 2018. And the deepening awareness of this among Democrats, I think is part of what you saw on Friday when House Democrats said pass the damn infrastructure bill. Get it out the door. We've got to go. I don't think there's any -- whatever the squad says.

I don't think there's any argument to be made that it helped Terry McAuliffe to not have

an infrastructure bill that would have massively benefited Virginia that has traffic problems and the east coast busiest port. So this would have been a great place to have been able to talk about that stuff. So I think you already saw a direct result in the expedited passage of that legislation.

The Republican side is weird -- not surprisingly a little weirder because I've heard a lot and I've been asked a lot and talked a lot about, well, how did Glenn Youngkin handle Donald Trump? He handled Donald Trump so well. I said, no, no, no. Donald Trump handled Glenn Youngkin, right?

At any moment, Donald Trump could have lost this race for the Republicans. He could have walked into Northern Virginia any given Sunday and held a big dumb rally and terrified everybody. And said to all of the persuadables that Amy identified. Those independents who made the difference and those folks would have said, oh, we're still doing crazy. I didn't know we were still doing crazy.

We saw what Trump did to the Republican majority in the Senate in Georgia. He lost the majority for them. He could have done it in Virginia, but he chose not to. Now, we're not used to much Trump strategy, but this is what Republicans are trying to process now. He's still very popular in the party. Most recent NBC News polls said that something like 40 percent, 45 percent of Republicans still said they think of themselves more as Trump supporters than Republicans.

So this is not by any stretch of the imagination resolved, but it will influence the thinking.

MR. WILLIAMS: Great. So your bottom line is about 35, 40 seats, Chris?

MR. STIREWALT: So it would be like 31. I think the number is 31, but we're talking about a range. We're talking about dozens of seats.

MR. WILLIAMS: Right.

MR. STIREWALT: And I'm not saying that's what will happen. What I am saying is if you applied the same shift of 11.25 points to the 2018 House result and moved the majority over in that direction. Give Republicans 50 -- about 51 percent of the national popular vote, which would roughly translate out to 242 seats or something like that.

MR. WILLIAMS: And what does that say about the Senate?

MR. STIREWALT: Well, the Senate is weird and great and you never know because in

the Senate and this is a lesson that Republicans can take from Virginia very much. Personnel matters a great deal. If the Republicans nominate J.D. Vance or whatever in Ohio, they can give that seat away for sure.

We've seen what the unraveling in the Pennsylvania Senate seats replaced Pat Toomey. So the Senate has correlation historically with the president's party in power. Every Democratic president since Lyndon Johnson has lost one -- at least one Senate seat. The Republicans have the advantage and the construction of the Senate. So there's a little less salience there, but there's light correlation.

MR. WILLIAMS: All right. Well, thank you so much, Chris.

Next up, John Hudak. John is Deputy Director of the Center for Effective Public Management at The Brookings Institution and a Senior Fellow in Governance Study. John's research exams questions of presidential power. Additionally, he focuses on campaigns, elections, legislature and executive interaction and state and federal marijuana policy. He's the author of *Marijuana: A short history* and *Presidential Pork: White House Influence over the Distribution of Federal Grants*.

John, thanks for being here. The sun is getting to me a little bit. I apologize. Democrats, John, can't seem to effectively communicate ideas that seem to be popular in polls like infrastructure or better social safety net programs or COVID prevention. Republicans on the other hand, they seem to do great at opposing ideas. What's your prescription for this going forward? What do you see?

MR. HUDAK: Well, Juan, thanks. And don't worry about the sunlight. It just looks like there's divine intervention in our panel today. And so, I think we're all blessed for having you here.

And thanks for the question. I'm going to build a bit off of what Chris said. I think a lot of what we're seeing from -- in response to the election last week is a scatter shot of lessons that are probably all really poorly lessons or poorly understood lessons.

What it comes down to for Democrats is a messaging issue. They are not communicating with a sufficient number of voters. Whether it's base voters, whether it's mainstream Democrats, whether it's independents and Democratic leaders.

When we look across election results last week. I think there's too much focus right now

on the Virginia governor's race and the New Jersey governor's race. We need to look at mayor's races and city council races and other ballot initiative races across the country. And what you see is every part of the Republican party lost. Whether it's progressives in Seattle who really got hit hard in a variety of races. Whether it is a, you know, a Democratic nominee losing to an incumbent write-in candidate for mayor in Buffalo. You're seeing progressives hit badly.

In other areas of the country, you're seeing Centrists and moderates hit badly. And so, what it tells you is not that one shift or another within the Democratic party or a shift in one direction or another is the effective path forward. The effective path forward is simple. It's talk to voters. Understand what their concerns are and craft policy ideas that meet those voters where they sit.

Simply going out with a laundry list of national talking points is not going to matter in the, you know, Sixth Congressional District of Tennessee. What matters is understanding what the voters in the Sixth Congressional District of Tennessee care about. This isn't rocket science. And yes, the Democratic brand was badly damaged over the past year.

And, you know, as Amy and Chris pointed out. Gridlock doesn't help that. And gridlock in the House clearly broke finally when Democrats looked at the results and said, okay, we're doing something wrong here. That is the lesson to learn. The lesson is there is a path to connect with voters. Voters support this legislation, let's pass this legislation. Again, it's politics 101, but unfortunately, it is going to give way to a lot of phony finger pointing, machinations within the Democratic party that are going to result in the wrong lessons to be learned.

And I think that can also spread within the Republican party. Republicans are confident right now, and they should be. They had a really good night last Tuesday. But, you know, politics is short term. Voter's memories are short term. If the economy is booming even more than it is a year from now, Republicans are not going to do as well on election night 2022 as they did on election night 2021.

They might still do well. They might still win back the House or Senate, but if this is the bottom right now for Democrats. If this is the basement, it looks up from here. And that depends on whether they recruit good candidates. They get their messaging straight. They understand that the

messaging and the Bronx does not have to be the messaging in Nashville. And the sooner that they understand that and communicate that the better that the party will be.

At the same time, for Republicans, they need to look at Glenn Youngkin's candidacy both as a roadmap and with some caution. A roadmap because he ran a masterful campaign. I think anyone who looks at what he did in Virginia and says that it was luck is fooling themselves. He did everything that he needed to do to beat Terry McAuliffe and he did it.

At the same time though Glenn Youngkin's primary process was a pretty unique one. He was selected in a convention. Not every candidate will be afforded this sort of quietness that can exist around a convention relative to an open, public media heavy primary. And so, Glenn Youngkin's ability to walk this fine line of attracting Trump voters and telling independent voters that he wasn't a Trump Republican was done masterfully.

I'm not convinced Glenn Youngkin could have done that if he had to run in an open, public primary like a lot of other gubernatorial, Senatorial and House candidates are going to need to do in the run up to 2022. And so, while I think looking to the Youngkin race as a model is important that is not the sole model that will win for Republicans.

And if they rest on their laurels with trying to run a Youngkin campaign, the normal primary process in the United States could really give them the types of problems that Chris was talking about in his comments of really risking running very bad candidates when you have very good alternatives in Republican primaries in a lot of states and districts.

MR. WILLIAMS: John, thanks very much. Now, I'm going to pick up on just what you were talking about with Elaine.

Elaine Kamarck is our clean-up hitter here today. She's a Senior Fellow in Governance Studies at Brookings as well as Director of the Center for Effective Public Management at the Brookings Institution. Elaine is an expert on American electoral politics and government innovation not only in the United States but around the world. And she focuses her research on the presidential nominating system.

Elaine has worked in many American presidential campaigns and in the Clinton White House. She is the author of [*Primary Politics: Everything You Need to Know about How America Nominates Its Presidential Candidates*](#). She is also the author of [*Why Presidents Fail and How They Can Succeed Again*](#).

So, Elaine, I'm going to prompt you with this question. Let's talk about one or two failed messages. Defund the police and also this reconciliation bill with social safety net legislation that's still pending. But it's become known less for its -- for components that poll pretty well than for its price tag. How do Democrats fix this problem? Or is this -- am I overemphasizing it? Is the proverbial tempest in a teapot. What do you think? You need to unmute, Elaine.

MS. KAMARCK: There, now I'm unmuted. Sorry. I wasn't pushing that hard enough. Thank you, Juan. And thank you, Juan and Chris and Amy for joining us at Brookings today.

I think that the Democratic party has sort of the opposite of an asset that the Republicans had for years and years. We have sort of the opposite of Frank Luntz. Frank Luntz says as many of you know is a political consultant who is famous for coming up with just the right term to get to the voter.

So for instance, he's the person who turned estate taxes into death taxes. And, you know, that was quite an accomplishment on his part. Democrats seem to do completely the opposite. We seem to turn popular policy into unpopular policy because we don't have a Frank Luntz. And I hope that Democrats get one.

So let's start with a couple of facts that emerged after the George Floyd killings in Minneapolis. According to the FBI, 38 percent of murders, 66 percent of rapes, 70 percent of robberies and 47 percent of aggravated assaults go under cleared every year. At the same time, as my colleague, Rashon Ray has written, nine out of 10 police calls don't involve violent encounters.

They involve everything from the cat up the tree to the drug addict passed out in the middle of the subway steps. So out of these two problems emerged the effort to reallocate money, change the policing ideas so that you, in fact, had people dealing with many of these problems related to mental illness. And guess what? Freeing up policeman to actually solve crime.

Now, solving crime is a really important thing that I would guess all voters like. Somehow, however, the Democrats manage to turn this well thought out movement about police reform into defund the police, which left vast numbers of Americans thinking that when the robber was breaking their window and knocking down their door either nobody was going to arrive or a little old lady social worker in tennis shoes was going to arrive instead.

Democrats kind of caught on after a while that this had to be one of the worse slogans ever. And although Democratic candidates stopped using it, their Republican opponents did not stop using it nor did Republican opponents stop using a couple of years before the slogan to abolish ICE, okay? That's the Immigration Customs Enforcement. So Democrats seem to have this foot in the mouth problem. They come up with a decent policy and then manage to sell it in a way that kills it.

You mentioned, John, you also asked about this reconciliation bill. You know, it had everything in it but the kitchen sink. Every single thing in it polled well and was something that America needed, but a lot of people wanted. And yet, by putting it together the way they did, they basically came up with the following problem. The best way to describe the bill was by how much it cost. So this bill was marketed as a \$3.5 trillion bill. And somehow, some people decided that it was a defeat to be less than \$3.5 trillion. Some people decided that you had to make it way less than \$3.5 trillion. And the bottom line is that the Democrats never could really convey to the American people the things that were in that bill that they might like.

So we need a Frank Luntz in the Democratic party. The Democratic party is really addicted to shooting itself in the foot when it comes up with these policies and then comes up with a tag line for these policies that, in fact, turns people off.

Given that we are in a very close situation in terms of this country where racists are close. They have been close for a long time. A little bit matters. You know, those one or two percent of people who think that the Terry McAuliffe really does want to teach critical race theory in schools. I mean that matters.

And I just think that the Democrats have been doing this for some years now. Whether

it's abolish ICE. Whether it's abolish defund the police. Whether it's socialism. They've been basically managing to take some pretty popular ideas and message them in a way that kills them. And if they keep doing this then I think that 2022 is going to look pretty bad for the Democrats.

MR. WILLIAMS: But, Elaine, let's pick up on this. What's the other side of this equation in terms of Republican messaging? Because it looks to me like they do less messaging than they do opposing or charactering those Democratic messages.

MS. KAMARCK: Yeah. Well, they do. And they're awfully good at it, okay? I mean they're awfully good at it. I mean they picked critical race theory up out of the obscure corners of academia and turned it into an issue about parents and parental rights. That's pretty good.

Obviously, Republicans need to have something to run on. Donald Trump, as Chris mentioned. You know, Donald Trump manages to convince some of these independents that, you know, these Republicans are slightly off their rocker, but Glenn Youngkin achieved exactly the opposite.

And, in fact, I think what Glenn Youngkin did was he showed Republicans how to run in a post-Trump era and still retain the Trump base without turning off all those independents out there. And, you know, you just look at the numbers in Loudoun County, Alexandria, Fairfax Counties. You know, McAuliffe lost just enough. You know, just enough in those big Democratic counties to cost him the race.

MR. WILLIAMS: So let's go to the interactive and conversational part of this among ourselves, the panelists here.

One of the things that Elaine just mentioned was critical race theory and sort of culture wars, which is what I think maybe Youngkin's strategy. He didn't run with Trump, but he sure used a lot of Trump type attitude and policy with regard to culture wars. Is that going to work going forward? Not only in the midterms but in local races? What do you guys think?

MR. HUDAK: Well, I'll go first, Juan. I think that strategy is going to work if Democrats let it work. And to Elaine's point, if there's no countering of that type of messaging or if the countering to the messaging around things like critical race theory is the approach that Terry McAuliffe took and getting caught with just some really bad talking points or sound bytes rather. Yeah, Republicans are going to

keep on doing what they're doing until it stops working for them.

I mean they have been masterful at this. You know, if you look at same sex marriage in 2004, that was a really effective message for them and they kept at it until it stopped working for them. And then they stopped talking about same sex marriage entirely. And they moved onto something else. That's effective politic. And if Democrats are always caught behind the ball on this, they're going to continue to lose elections.

You know, there's a debate in the House right now among House Democrats about whether they just stop talking about critical race theory or they start to really take it on. I think the latter is the proper approach, right? If you just stop talking about something, you let the other side make all of the arguments. Both your arguments and their arguments. And that's what happened to Democrats in Virginia.

Republicans weren't just making Republican arguments. They were making Democratic arguments and tagging them to Democrats. And so, until there is this powerful and effective pushback not just about the policies that they oppose but the policies that they stand for, Democrats are going to look like bystanders to their own political fortunes.

And to Elaine's point about reconciliation. Reconciliation has a lot of really popular provisions within it. It was the reconciliation bill as it is currently proposed. And it reminds me of another big piece of legislation that had a lot of very popular provisions in it that the American public vehemently opposed as a whole and that's the Affordable Care Act.

The idea that simply because you're putting together something that has a lot of popular provisions that it will be a willing issue for you is fundamentally false. You have to be able to sell not just the individual parts but the whole package to the American people. And I think --

MR. WILLIAMS: All right. Let me cut you off there because you said a lot. But I just want to get Chris and Amy in on this culture wars issue because to me it also has a strong racial component and I'm not sure given the Democratic party base that they can ignore that kind of culture war's argument. Chris, Amy pop in here.

MR. STIREWALT: You first.

MS. WALTER: Okay. Well, let me say I was going to respond broadly and then I'll go directly at that.

The more broad characterization especially in Virginia where we had critical race theory and the discussion about it. Is that I don't think it would have been that powerful, quite frankly, if Joe Biden were more popular. If we hadn't just spent the last two years in COVID school. If you didn't have a genuine frustration by the public.

And we were seeing this in poll after poll. Seventy percent think the country is headed in the wrong direction, right? So in a bad time when people are feeling pessimistic and anxious and then you throw something like this. You just talk broadly about the schools. Remember in every single ad that Glenn Youngkin ran, the term critical race theory never appeared. It never appeared. This was a conversation that was happening here. If you're a voter it's just like, you know, trying to watch Jeopardy. You know, or some other show. You know, Wheel of Fortune.

You saw Glenn Youngkin on there talking about parents need to have control of schools. This guy, Terry McAuliffe, he doesn't want that to happen. Also, teachers, we should pay them more. What's not to love about that messaging, right?

New Jersey you had a similar collapse for Democrats. They didn't talk about that issue in New Jersey. So there is something that's more broad based. So on Republicans, I would also be careful in assuming that this suggests that voters really embrace the issue and that they want to go where Republicans want to go on this issue and trying to push it as far as they can.

So in terms of the race piece. There's no doubt that, look, this is the fundamental issue that we have in politics today. It's been the fundamental issue in American politics for as long as this country has been in existence, which is how race does and does not get discussed in campaigns. Sometimes, it's quiet. Sometimes, a little bit louder, but there's always that undercurrent.

And the thing about the suburbs especially in this day and age is that even though it is true McAuliffe did not hit Biden like numbers in those places like Loudoun or Fairfax County. He won

them by huge margins. He won them by Obama like margins. So that group of voters isn't going away. They're not running back to Republicans. It's if you don't hit Biden like numbers and you collapse in the rural parts of the state. Well, that's your challenge.

MR. WILLIAMS: So, Chris, how do you play on this one?

MR. STIREWALT: Well, first I don't know what made me want to go after Amy, which is always a mistake. It's like going after Charles on the special report panel. He would leave nothing. There was not even a crumb to sop up your gravy with.

MS. WALTER: You're a good sop up, Chris. I've got to tell you. Remind me about your Venmo address when this over.

MR. STIREWALT: You only suck up to people who deserve it. And when you deserve it, let it rip.

The reality for a lot of Democrats is that they're going to overstate the significance that critical race theory played in the race because it is self-soothing, right? Bigot Republicans and bigot voters and hashtag white women. And this stuff feels better, right? In the same way that Republicans will do the same thing in a loss.

You will find the most negative attribute in your opponent. You will overstate the -- so there were bigots who voted in this election on this issue and it was a driving issue for them and their cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs. But the real problem for Terry McAuliffe is the Democratic party relationship with the American Federation of Teachers and the NEA.

What happened in Virginia schools was abominable. It was a thorough going disaster. Fairfax County which is supposed to be the crown jewel of America's public-school systems failed. They didn't in person for months and months. After other school districts even in the area, even across the river in Maryland had figured out a way to get kids back in class, which means parents can go back to work. Which means in all this stuff, they could not figure out a way to get it done.

And it's not surprising that they want to punish them. It's not surprising. When Terry McAuliffe brought in -- I thought when my friend texted me to say that it was happening. I thought it was a

joke. I thought he was being sarcastic. But to bring Randi Weingarten in for your closing argument at the end of the cycle.

At a point where we know that the voters of Virginia have already made it clear that they've had it up to here with the status quo in schools. Was crazy except for the fact that by that point I assume McAuliffe knew all he could do now was crank up the base, right? All he could try to do was try to maximize the base because he knew he was in such bad trouble.

The truth of the matter is on the issues that matter, I think Biden is -- I think we will look back on this week for Democrats and say, this was the turning point in a big, big way. The loss in Virginia helped them get their head out of their you know where. They've started to look at things more rationally and the other big news, by the way for Biden, the development of the antivirals does effectively mean the end of the pandemic, right?

With this level of vaccination and now with the antivirals, 90 percent reduction. So this paves the way back to normal. So this, I think will end up being a very good week for Democrats, but it will depend on two issues. Biden used to have a great phrase. Shots in arms, money in pockets, right? Or money in wallets. That was the point of the Biden administration was we're going to beat the pandemic and we're going to get you paid. We're going to make it happen. If those things happen these wedge issues like critical race theory and whatever else will fall to the wayside because voters move en masse towards those goals.

MR. WILLIAMS: So that was interesting. So let me just quick ask you all for quick comments on what Chris just had to say because Chris is indicating that actually last week was pretty good beyond the election if you start to think about the economic numbers, passage of the infrastructure bill and the fact that they look to have their ducks in a row to pass the social safety net legislation.

MR. STIREWALT: I didn't say that last one.

MR. WILLIAMS: No, that was me. That was me.

MR. STIREWALT: I think given what the squad did on Friday and voting as a block against legislation that they and their constituents wanted. They just let 50 Democrats in competitive

districts off the hook for the social welfare package. I think that was one of the most foolish political choices that I've seen in a while. They just let all those moderates off the hook.

MR. WILLIAMS: And well, we'll see. Okay. But any way just quickly. Elaine, why don't you take a shot and then, John, you can go.

MS. KAMARCK: Yeah. Look, I mean I think this is very thought provoking, Chris. But I think -- and I think you're right. People were especially in Fairfax which I know something about. People were sick to death of the situation. The way Fairfax school district handled COVID.

Nonetheless, there is in every race it seems, there's a little -- we call them dog whistles that get the race issue somehow in there. And I think that that is what was happening here. I mean somebody sent me a piece from the National Review looking at the Virginia website and saying, look, look, look. There really is critical race theory being taught in the schools.

I read that. I read it different. I read the Virginia education website over the weekend. Can you imagine what a boring life I have? And but --

MR. STIREWALT: You know how to party.

MS. KAMARCK: I know how to party, right? But it struck me as, no, they were trying to teach teachers how to be sensitive to Black students. Not -- but nonetheless, the fact is that that's out there, right? Whatever it is. There's always that.

And what my argument is that Democrats fall for it. Democrats let them in. How many times do we have to have a, you know, a gay marriage going way back. A gay marriage on the ballot or transgender bathrooms. Talk about a nonissue, right? Transgender bathrooms. Or abolish ICE or defund the police or something like this that in these close races, you know, cuts in.

Now, the second thing I would say is this has been reminding me. You know, we all talked on Friday afternoon. And then a couple of hours later, well, actually in the evening, they finally passed the infrastructure bill, right? And the world changed and suddenly on Saturday morning, Joe Biden didn't look like a depressed old man. He looked like a wise, energetic uncle. I mean the change in his demeanor was enormous.

The question is, is this the warning sign that gets the Democrats to get their act together, okay? Stop dealing with all this foolishness about socialism and stuff like that. Get your act together. The Democrats are delivering really good things for the American people. Whether it's all those jobs that come from building bridges or it's the elements of the reconciliation bill which I think will, in fact, pass.

And by the way, I think that they let the squad have that vote because once they knew that there were 13 Republicans that were going to vote with them. I think that was one of those deals.

MR. WILLIAMS: Well, let me quickly go to John on this though, Elaine. About did you think, John, it was a good week on the economy? And that the economy might be an effective message for the Democrats come the midterms?

MR. HUDAK: Yeah, absolutely. I mean other than Tuesday, last week was a pretty good week for Democrats, right? I mean it's one of those, other than that, Ms. Lincoln, how was the play going? But still there was a lot of good news.

Great economic news on Friday. Obviously, the bill passing as well. And I agree with Chris. There is a subset of Americans who are going to vote on race related issues because they hear that dog whistle from a Republican politician and they do it.

But you know what? They're probably going to vote for that Republican politician regardless. What is happening with independents though in the polling that we're seeing particularly around the President's job approval rating is significant. And to Chris' point, if the economy is booming in a year and Democrats are getting things done in Congress, yes, those dog whistle politics, things are going to happen.

They're going to matter a lot less to independent voters. If the President and cabinet members and the House and Senate leadership are essentially doing an economic victory tour in October of next year that's going to be extremely powerful for independent voters who are considering handing the keys back to Democrats in the House and Senate and considering whether to continue to keep the President or his party in the White House in 2024.

And so, right now, you know, maybe the last jobs report and some of the other economic

data were blips. And if that's the case the President is going to have a long year ahead. But if this is going to continue a type of momentum that the President had for three days in November of 2021, it can mean a very powerful shift in American politics. I don't know if that necessarily saves the House and Senate for Democrats, but it may stave off what were numbers that I agree with from Chris at the outset. The range we're looking at right now, 30 to 40 House seats lost.

I mean if it cuts that in half, we're in three-quarters. Maybe that's considered a win for Democrats next November.

MR. WILLIAMS: All right. So let's take some questions from the audience. I have a question here. Paul asked this question and I think, Amy, this would be something for you to take a quick shot at.

What percentage of voters in Virginia, New Jersey were noncollege educated, white women in comparison to 2020? What was the swing towards the GOP among these non-educated, noncollege educated, white women?

MS. WALTER: So it's a very good question. But let me start with my big caveat. Chris knows more about exit polls than all the rest of us since he has been at the forefront of the vote cast system.

I have seen the polls for which the exit polls for which this color is discussing. And, yes, it looks as if the big swing was not from white, college educated voters. Their percent of the electorate and the support that they gave to Democrat was similar. But the swing among white college voters -- white noncollege voters was significant.

Now, I think we have to be very careful though in focusing so much on that one cross tab in part because these exit polls tend to not necessarily be the best -- they can sometimes show us a trend, but I want to get hung up on the actual number itself. There are a number of organizations that actually -- and we'll be doing this soon enough.

We'll dive into the voter file. They'll be able to give us a better real number to that. But I think the overall message from Virginia is that, yes, there is some suburban, quote, unquote, snap back.

And we saw that in New Jersey as well with the Democratic candidates not doing as well in some of these whiter, wealthier, higher educated suburbs like Loudoun in Virginia or Bergen in New Jersey.

But at the same time the support that Democrats have been getting from white working-class voters dropping. Now, there are two ways to think of this. One is, oh, my gosh. The bottom has fallen out. Democrats now. We thought that Democrats couldn't do worse among white, noncollege voters. Couldn't do worse in rural areas. There is no bottom. We're going to get to a point where it's 90/10 Republican.

Or you say, maybe the people who show up, and this comes to the point about a midterm electorate and who is enthusiastic and who is not. The enthusiastic noncollege voters also happen to agree with what they're hearing from Glenn Youngkin. What they're not seeing from Joe Biden. They didn't like Joe Biden. They didn't vote for Joe Biden. They are excited to turn out because they see the Democratic party turning the country in a direction they don't like.

Those voters who were Biden voters or liked what the Democrats were saying didn't feel like it was important that they turn out. Maybe they're disappointed. Maybe they didn't think it was important. Maybe they just checked out since the election. That's all total normal. It's similar to what we saw, as I said, in 2018 where the question was, oh, man. Without Trump on the ballot, I guess, you know, the Trump coalition doesn't turn out. True. They turned out in 2020. They also turned out in 2021 because if they didn't need Trump on the ballot, they've got Biden now and so they're coming out against what they see. Rather than coming out --

MR. WILLIAMS: Okay. Well, you know, so, Chris, I'm going to ask you. You know, you heard the question from the person who called in. But I would just add into what Amy was saying.

You know, when I think about this, I think Trump is even less popular according to polls I saw than Biden in the state of Virginia.

MR. STIREWALT: Yeah. Not by a ton anymore, but yes. He is. This is like saying, what is less popular, sleet or hail? You know, it's not great. It's not great.

I think the most recent NBC News national survey had Trump 13 points underwater on

favorability and Biden eight points underwater on favorability. So there's a difference, but here's how I see this. There is nothing in these results. And to Amy's point, the typically Virginia gubernatorial year electorate is 72 to 76 percent white and the quadrennial electorate in Virginia is going to be 65, 67 percent white. It's a very different looking electorate.

What made the four years ago gubernatorial election in Virginia so different? It looked just like a presidential electorate. It had the same percentages. It had the same distribution because the Democratic coalition came out, right? Voter, people of color came out. Lower propensity voters came out. Now, Republicans have the same problem the Democrats do because their coalition is increasingly dependent on working class noncollege whites, right?

The crown jewel, speaking of crown jewels, the crown jewel of the American electoral coalition are what? Educated, rich people. The better educated you are and the more money you make, the more likely you are to vote. It's iron clad and those are the most -- they're the most reliable voters, but they're also annoying. They're hugely annoying because they're demanding and they're annoying and they read Twitter, they're the worse.

But this is part of the coalitional shift. And I just want to add this part of it. There is nothing in these results at all that Democrats could not have seen in the 2020 election results. It is true that Donald Trump tried to steal a second presidential term and will not admit that he lost the election. Coma, however, Democrats engaged in another version, a much more benign self-deception about what 2020 said.

What the result of 2020 that I saw said was we do not like the bad, orange man. Make him go away. We cannot tolerate Donald Trump anymore. But then we looked down the ballot and we see how Republicans are performing in the House. We see how they gained one legislative chamber on the state level. They gained a governorship, loss none. And if it wouldn't have been for the Georgia debacle, would have held onto the Senate.

So the message for Democrats was, hey, guys. If you could be normal, we would really appreciate it and give back the lava light. Just give us a minute, we'll get there.

MR. WILLIAMS: All right. Let me quickly move onto ask you to speed up your responses. This is really good, though so thanks.

This one comes from someone I knew when I worked at MPR, Ron Elving (phonetic) now at American University. He says, do the results amplify or reduce the prospect of more noise coming from Donald Trump? John, why don't you start?

MR. HUDAK: Sure. You know, I agree with what Chris said at the outset that Donald Trump's restraint -- and let's be honest, that's what it was. He could have flown into Richmond or, you know, the Northern suburb of the -- you know, the D.C. suburbs in Northern Virginia or headed into Southwest Virginia and really changed this race very quickly. Whether it was three months out or three days out.

He could have had an impact. But frankly now that we're seeing these final election results. Come in and Youngkin can win by about two percent. That kind of shifted two percent of the Virginia electorate quite easily. And so, I think it is the model for what 2022 should look like.

I will not believe in Donald Trump's sort of universal restraint until I see it. I think the temptation is going to be too much there. And let's be honest, Youngkin did not want Trump in the state. There are going to be a lot of Congressional candidates and gubernatorial candidates who will want Donald Trump in the state even if it is not to their political benefit.

Surely for some candidates it will be to their benefit especially in deep red districts. But in some of these swing districts, you know, if you think about a place like Pennsylvania. If the Republican nominee, whoever that ends up being, for Senate or governor ends up, you know, wrapping their arms around Donald Trump that could spell some trouble.

And the other challenge that could exist is in a state that has both the Senate and a gubernatorial contest. If one of those candidates wants Trump there and the other one doesn't want Trump there. He's coming regardless. And so, that could really turn things upside down.

So, yeah, I do not have faith in Donald Trump's restraint to stay out of races where he needs to stay out of, but who knows? Maybe he'll surprise me and he'll stay home in Florida and things

will work out well for Democrats.

MR. WILLIAMS: Well, I must say someone watching this webinar from Brookings. If you're looking at Amy or Chris, they're nodding along with you, John. They agree with what you just said.

MS. KAMARCK: Yeah, yeah. That's exactly right.

MR. WILLIAMS: Elaine, go ahead.

MS. KAMARCK: I was just going to say that this funny thing about not just the Virginia and the New Jersey races but all the recent races is just how incredibly nationalized American politics is these days.

You know, Tip O'Neill was very famous, the speaker was very famous for saying, all politics is local. I think these days, we have to say no politics is local. So the thought, as John was talking about, of Trump coming into a very red district, but it having no effect on the other races in the state or in the country is ridiculous, right? Wherever he goes, he can't sneak into a district. And where it's a, you know, according to the famous Cook report with a plus nine R rating. He can't sneak into that district and not have the Democrats notice or not have the independents notice. Everybody knows everything these days. And I think that the amount of restraint it will take for him to not go anywhere is pretty awesome.

And then if you play that from 2022 to 2024, you have to wonder about a presidential candidate who runs in Republican primary. Let's suppose he does, you know, he restrained. A presidential candidate running in a Republican primary who has not campaigned for anyone. That's also not a good way to run when your party's nomination. So it's a weird situation here. You know if he gets in he's probably going to hurt his party. If he doesn't get in, he's probably going to hurt himself with his Republican party because they haven't seen him in four years.

And there will be other people, Josh Hawley, Tom Cotton, whoever. There will be other people who will be out there campaigning for Republicans in 2022 and setting themselves up nicely for the presidential.

MR. WILLIAMS: All right. So one last question because we're running low on time here.

This comes from Crosby King and he says, I heard very little about Democratic successes in Georgia where they expected to flip as many seats as they did. Anybody have a notion there?

MR. STIREWALT: Well, that one kind of generous, right? You have a run off. You have Trump doing all his weird stuff. He's suppressing the vote on the bottom end of the socioeconomic spectrum by telling people not to vote because it's rigged. And then he's telling people, oh, you can go look in the North Atlantic suburbs and see the shady -- you go to Druid Hills. You can go to those tawny neighborhoods in Northside suburbs in Atlanta, the missing voters are present.

These people in Virginia, they should have come out to vote for a Republican Senate. They chose not to and Donald Trump made that happen.

MR. WILLIAMS: All right. Amy, did you have a thought there?

MS. WALTER: I don't know if this person is talking about there were special elections in Georgia for -- or municipal elections in Georgia as well. But I'll just say to that I did not follow the special elections in Georgia or -- specifically.

But overall if you look at -- and this was true before this November election. But of all the state legislative special elections where the folks are very good at crunching these numbers. What they've come up with is a shift overall in competitive races by about four points to the Republicans. Compare that to the 2017 special elections for state legislative seats and that was a nine-point shift to Democrats which again even if it's four points, Chris has pointed to, well, if you have an 11-point swing that's going to be huge blow out. Yeah, four-point swing to Republicans next year.

There goes the House and also the Senate. This is the thing that is really dangerous for Democrats. The good news, they don't have to defend red seats like they did in 2010 and 2014 and 2018. The bad news is the seats they do have to defend went barely for Biden, right? So they've got to do Arizona and Georgia, Nevada, New Hampshire and then in a really bad year, in a plus 11 years for Republicans. Well, then you put something like Colorado on the watch list as well as a state that we sort of taken off of our battleground states.

And it also means that Democrats have very little chance to win in competitive districts and competitive states that are open like Pennsylvania or Wisconsin or North Carolina.

MR. WILLIAMS: All right. So it's time now for final thoughts as we come to the end of this -- what I thought was very interesting session.

Let me ask Elaine to kick us off. Elaine, what are your final thoughts hearing from Chris, Amy and John?

MS. WALTER: Well, I would think my final thoughts are that there's actually some silver linings in this cloud.

One is that people who are hell bent on saying that the system is rigged now see that this rigged system actually -- Republicans win in this rigged system. So hopefully, that will begin to tamp down this massive distrust that people have been floating out there about the electoral system, which is bad for democracy. So that's my little silver lining in this story.

MR. WILLIAMS: I think that was an interesting point because obviously it can't be. But anyway, Chris, why don't you go second?

MR. HUDAK: I just loved how normal of an election it was. We had like, I called him business casual Romney running against a like a Bill Clinton clone. And it was a very normal election.

I laughed when people said, you know, Youngkin is borrowing Trump's tactics by taking Terry McAuliffe out of context in his statement about the future. Well, let me tell you. Donald Trump did not make -- did not invent lying about your opponent. This is not a brand, new thing.

So I just liked that it was -- to echo Elaine's point. I liked that it was a normal election. It was contested normally on normal grounds. The result was respected by all involved and we seemed to be able to act like -- like we seemed to be able to act like grownups for a little bit and I like that.

MR. WILLIAMS: Well, that's always appreciated. John?

MR. HUDAK: Sure. So one of the takeaways I have from the other night and looking forward to 2022 and 2024 is I'm curious whether either party is going to start to transition in the way that they've talked to millennial voters and Gen Z voters.

These are voters who are, you know, fairly liberal voters, very progressive -- fairly progressive minded individuals, but they don't necessarily think about politics in the normal two-party way that some of the older generations do in both the ability to message to those voters. Millennials now being the largest voting block in the United States and the platforms on which they communicate with them particularly Gen Z voters is going to matter a lot.

And you can drum up a lot of votes in the base and create a lot of base voters simply by connecting with these younger voters in effective ways and on their own terms. And if the Democrats party is unwilling to do that it's going to make election night in 2022 and 2024 all that much more difficult. But in the next year and three years if they can really hone in that craft well that is a real untapped wealth of political clout that I think both parties underappreciate right now. And the winner of those groups is going to win a lot of elections.

MR. WILLIAMS: Just to reiterate that. Those groups in your mind are young voters, basically?

MR. HUDAK: Yeah, millennials and Gen Zers. As a millennial myself, an older millennial granted. I'll admit that, you know, a lot of politicians don't speak to us effectively and that is magnified for Gen Z voters as well.

MR. WILLIAMS: All right. Amy, final thought. You're wrapping us up.

MS. WALTER: Okay. I'm going to wrap us up but I'm also going to put a plug in for really the most underappreciated generation ever which is Gen X. We are the sandwich -- that's right, Chris.

We always talk about Baby Boomers and millennials. Hey, we are the people getting it done. No one pays attention to us. We're the middle child. So you go ahead, millennials and Baby Boomers with your fights. Chris and I are going to figure it all out.

I'm just going to read one thing. This goes to the very heart of what comes next and the challenge ahead for Democrats. Yes, they passed the bipartisan bill. They've still got the Build Back Better. This just came out from CNN today. It mirrors other polling that we've seen. CNBC, navigator

polling.

Does President Biden have the right priorities, or hasn't he paid enough attention to the country's most important problems? Only 42 percent feel like the Biden administration is tackling the right priorities. Fifty-eight percent, he's not doing enough on the country's most important problems. Compare that to where Donald Trump was at this point in -- I'm sorry in election time, 2018, it was almost exactly the same. Only 40 percent thought Trump was handling the problems that were important to people. Fifty-six percent said he wasn't.

You've got it. John, I think said this. You've got to meet people where they are. They are frustrated. They are anxious. COVID and the economy are big drivers of it, but they also see that the President -- they don't see right now a president who is addressing them where they are.

If that doesn't change that 42, 58 number doesn't change. It's hard to see a turnaround no matter how many bills they pass.

MR. WILLIAMS: All right. Elaine Kamarck, John Hudak, Amy Walter, Chris Stirewalt, I want to say thank you so much. You guys not only were generous with your time but I mean you really know your business and know the business of American politics and we are all richer for having had you here this afternoon so thank you.

And thanks to all of you who tuned in for this Brookings webinar, election 2021, Results and Implications. I just wanted to add in here that you can, of course, continue to participate. The Twitter #Election2021 and you can always email us at events@brookings.edu. So thank you all for tuning, Zooming in, listening in. It's been great and we thank you. Good afternoon.

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