

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

WEBINAR

BIDEN AND TRUMP PUT TO THE TEST:
A PREVIEW OF THE 2022 MIDTERM ELECTIONS

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PROCEEDINGS

MS. LIASSON: Okay. Good morning, everyone. I want to welcome you to this Brookings webinar, which is called "Biden and Trump Put to the Test: A Preview of the 2022 Midterm Elections." I'm Mara Liasson. I'm the national political correspondent for National Public Radio. And today I am pleased to be moderating a panel of experts to discuss this election year. I want to remind the audience that they can submit questions via Twitter @Brookingsgov with #PrimariesProject, or you can email Events@Brookings.edu with your questions.

We're going to begin with a short presentation by Brookings Senior Fellow Elaine Kamarck. Elaine studies American politics and government. Before joining Brookings, she spent 17 years teaching at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, and before that she worked in the Clinton-Gore White House designing and implementing the Reinventing Government Project. Kamarck will be presenting preliminary results of the 2022 Primaries Project. This is the fourth study of all of the candidates who run in party primaries for Congress. And after that, we're going to pivot to the upcoming midterm elections for the panel and their insights about the primaries and about predictions about November.

I want to introduce our panelists. John Hudak is the senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and deputy director for the Center for Effective Public Management. His research examines questions of presidential power in the contexts of administration, personnel, and public policy. Additionally, John focuses on campaigns and elections, legislative and executive interaction — and we've got a lot of that right now — and state and federal marijuana policy. John's 2016 book, which is called "Marijuana: A Short History" — that's because they couldn't remember a long history — ha ha — offers a unique up to date profile of how cannabis emerged from the shadows of counterculture and illegality to become a serious, even mainstream, public policy issue.

Our other panelist is Ramesh Ponnuru. He is the editor of National Review, he's a columnist for Bloomberg Opinion and he's a contributing editor to the domestic policy journal, National Affairs. He's known as one of the conservative movement's foremost

intellectuals. His most recent book is an edited volume called "Room to Grow: Conservative Reforms for Limited Government and a Thriving Middle Class." It's been described as a reform conservative manifesto and policy agenda.

So, let's get started with Elaine.

Elaine, this is the fourth study you've conducted here at Brookings on the people who run in congressional primaries. We have a very confusing election cycle. It's kind of like the economy, it's kind of bloom and boom. We're not quite sure whether there is a red wave, a tsunami coming at democrats, or maybe the sun is shining on them right now. So, tell us what you've learned from studying congressional primaries and what specifically you learned from the 2022 primary season.

MS. KAMARCK: Thank you. Thank you, Mara, and thank you for joining us today at Brookings.

I'm going to take you through a couple of our preliminary findings. We have an enormous data set. And Catalina, if you would, please, put up the PowerPoint, we can get started. Next slide please.

Okay. In 2022 we found 2,362 candidates running in the primaries for House and Senate. There were more Republicans than Democrats — not surprising. 2022, as Mara alluded to, was at least supposed to be a red wave. When we looked at 2018, we had more Democrats running than Republicans because it was supposed to be a blue wave and it turned out to be that. So, we'll see what happens this time.

One of the most significant findings is that 64 percent of House and Senate incumbents faced 1 or more primary challengers. And that is an increase over past years. And it is also an increase compared to the first decade of the 21st century. So, what we find with a lot of members of Congress and senators being worried about being primaried, they are exactly right. Primary challenges are happening more frequently than they used to. Nonetheless, most incumbents still win their primaries, so this is sort of the paradox of congressional primaries. Only 15 have lost so far in 2022. We have a handful of small races yet to happen, so I don't think that's going to change very much. And part of that 15 is due

to redistricting. So, we had at least 6 districts where incumbents were running against incumbents and an incumbent was bound to lose. That's why the last time that we had a big number of incumbents losing was 2012, right after the 2010 census.

So, here's the paradox. Congressman senators are getting primaried more than they ever have been. They are still winning, but they worry about this, and they adjust their behavior accordingly.

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Okay. So, who were the kinds of people who ran? Most of the people were white male middle aged and educated. African Americans were heavily represented among Democrats, particularly compared to their numbers in the population. About 25 percent of the Democratic candidates were African American, which is a large number when you consider that African Americans are about 12 percent of the population. So, African Americans were very prominent in the Democratic Party. There were some in the Republican Party too.

Women constituted 27 percent of all candidates. That was a slight increase over 2018 when the number of women candidates rose dramatically. And more Democratic than Republican candidates were women.

Now, the Supreme Court decision on abortion occurred at the end of June, so it happened sort of right smack in the middle of the primary season. It's entirely possible that there might have been more women had that decision occurred earlier in the year or in the year before.

Next slide please.

Most of the candidates were married. Most of them had a four-year college degree or more and 17 percent of the candidates were military veterans, most of them were running as Republicans in Republican primaries.

Okay. So, that's kind of a quick demographic look. Not too many surprises there. But the important thing we look for in this study is we look for the factional makeup of each party. Because remember, primaries are contests within the party. So, what we're

trying to determine is where is this party going, right, what's happening to this political party. Because that of course has enormous consequences for governing. In a two-party system, the differences between the parties are important, but, frankly, the differences within the parties are quite important.

So, here's how we looked at that. Next slide please.

First, we looked at the Republican candidates and we looked at the Trump impact. As you can see from this table, the House and Senate candidates that were endorsed by Trump won their primaries overwhelmingly. Now, this number is buoyed by the fact that many of the people he endorsed were incumbents, who, as we saw, win almost all the time. And some of these races he endorsed were uncontested, so of course they were going to win. But, still, it was an impressive showing. But then we looked at sort of what the candidates were saying on their websites about Trump. We looked to see if there was a photo or a favorable mention of Trump, and a fair number of the Republican candidates had that. And we looked to see if there were favorable photos and mentions of MAGA or America First. A certain percentage of Republican candidates did that. Many of these candidates were not endorsed by Trump but were clearly trying to give the impression to the primary voters that they were Trumpy, that somehow Trump liked them, et cetera. You can see that they won less than the ones who Trump endorsed, but they were still prevalent.

And then, finally, almost 59 percent had not mention of Trump or America First and they didn't do terribly well. And that is an interesting finding. When I first saw this in our data — and unfortunately, I jumped to the gun and wrote about it, which will teach me not to write on partial data — I thought that this was evidence of a non-Trump Republican Party out there. And while many Republican candidates shied away from anything to do with Trump, the fact of the matter is they didn't do very well. And so, this is — Trump, let's face it, is a master at branding and he has clearly been successful in branding the Republican Party.

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Now, on the Democratic side, the story is really very different. We coded

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candidates by whether or not they were endorsed by Bernie Sanders or one of his close allies or one of the organizations that arose, like Our Revolution, as a result of his candidacy. And you see that they played in a very small percentage of the Democratic races, about half the percent that Trump played in, and won only 50 percent of their primaries. So the impact was simply much smaller.

We also looked to see if the candidate website was using any of the terms, like defund the police, abolish ICE, Medicare for all, Green New Deal, et cetera, if they were using any of those terms that were to signal sort of positions on the far left. And we found that that was only about a quarter of all Democratic candidates. By the way, they mostly stayed away from defund the policy. That was only a handful of these phrases. It was Medicare for all that was the one that was deemed to be most popular and safest to run on. And, again, candidates putting these on their websites won less than 50 percent of their primaries.

Significantly, 72 percent of Democratic candidates had no endorsements from the left wing of the Party and no mention of these issues. And that I think is a stark difference between the Democrats and the Republicans.

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We then looked at this same question of factions slightly differently. We looked at every single candidate, all 2,362 of them, and asked ourselves, okay, where does this person fit in the Republican Party, how did they identify themselves. And as you can see, many, many identified as MAGA or Trump Republicans. Many more — or some more, identified as sort of mainstream conservatives, and the number of moderates is very small, okay. That nobody in the Republican Party anymore seems to want to have anything to do with being moderate or mainstream. Several years ago we found a lot of what we call business Republicans running in Republican primaries. They seem to have disappeared. This is a powerful indication of the way the Republican Party has lurched to the right. We saw this emerging in 2014 when there were a lot of Tea Party candidates in the mix and that number has simply grown. They dropped the Tea Party label, but they adopted this

conservative label. And has been reported in the media, in some of these races, particularly the more high-profile races, you had Republican candidates fighting each other over who was the most Trumpy, who was the closest to Trump, who was the better heir to Donald Trump, et cetera. And a lot of these candidates wanted to — as I said before, wanted to give the impression to the voters that Trump really liked them, even if Trump had endorsed somebody else.

So, this is a good chart I think of the factional self-identification of the Republican congressional candidates. Another indication of the move to the right within the Republican Party.

Next slide please.

We then looked for the self-identification of Democratic congressional candidates. And there we find again a very different picture. Mainstream Democrats accounts basically we're for jobs, we're for fixing Obamacare, we're for this, that, and the other thing, were about 55 percent of all the Democratic candidates. Self-identified progressives were 32 percent. And here's some bad news for Republican ad makers — because I know Republican ad makers and a lot of Republican candidates are raring to go and warn of the socialists taking over America — only 1.45 percent of Democratic congressional candidates identified themselves as Democratic socialists. This amounted to 13 people. Only 5 of them won their primaries and they all were running in heavily Democratic districts. The least Democratic district was a D+23, which as you all know on the panel, but the audience may not, that's the Cook Political Values Index, and it shows how Democratic a district is. So, a D+23 means that you pretty much be a real awful candidate if you're a Democrat to lose in the district. Democrats are going to win.

So with that, I think that's the last slide, let's go back and I'll do a couple of final comments there. If we could go back go gallery, Catalina.

So, what do we take from this? We take from this that the polarization in American politics has been asymmetric. And by that we mean it has happened in one party more so than it has happened in the other party. Why is this? Well, I'll put out two

hypotheses that I think both merit discussion.

One is the way the media covers politics, right, which is what Marvin Kalb has recently referred to "both-sidesism". Which is, oh, well, we're talking about all these radicals on the Republican side, let's go find the radicals on the Democratic side. And the radicals on each side, the people on the ends have been happy to be found. As you know, they get good press, et cetera. And I think part of that is that coverage makes it look as if the Democratic Party is as polarized to the left as the Republican Party is polarized to the right.

The second reason I think this happens is that the Republican Party — and both parties have a vested interest as painting the other party as really out of step with America. And the Republican Party has been very, very good over the years as painting the Democratic Party as a party of crazy radicals who are going to socialize our industry, going to open our borders, going to take away the police, et cetera, et cetera. And of course, there's been enough pieces for them to hang their hat on in the Democratic conversation to make this into an ongoing critique of the Democrats. The fact of the matter is, however, if there is a moderate party in the country these days, what our data shows, is it's the Democratic Party, which is kind of moderate and — one final thought here — kind of boring, okay. Kind of boring, right. If you listen to poor Nancy Pelosi or Steny Hoyer or Jim Clyburn talking about all of the accomplishments of the Democrats, and they are good, but let's face it, infrastructure is boring and governing is kind of boring. And so, it makes sense that we have gotten this sort of unbalanced view of the polarization within each political party.

So with that, Mara, I will hand it back to you.

MS. LIASSON: Let me just ask you two quick questions and then I want to get Ramesh and John to weigh in here.

First of all, in terms of Trump's impact, we agree, the Republican Party is the Trump party — 96 percent is a really big number of endorsements that won. Did you separate out the races where either an incumbent wasn't challenged and he endorsed the incumbent? Or whether it was an open primary or whether he endorsed at the last minute

when the guy was way ahead? Was there any way to kind of control —

MS. KAMARCK: Yeah.

MS. LIASSON: — for him fiddling with the score. Because he wants to get his score up as high as possible.

MS. KAMARCK: Absolutely. Yes. And the score — if you take out those races, the score is not nearly as high, but it still better than 50 percent.

MS. LIASSON: Right.

MS. KAMARCK: Okay. So that's the bottom —

MS. LIASSON: Yeah, the point is that he's still the king maker, no matter what.

MS. KAMARCK: That's right. He's still the king maker. And the ones where — he has lost some big profile races, you know.

MS. LIASSON: In Georgia.

MS. KAMARCK: In Georgia, et cetera. But he's still the king maker. Now, we did not include governors' races or state races. And I think if you include it, he did lose the —

MS. LIASSON: You didn't include governors in here. Okay.

MS. KAMARCK: Yeah. He lost some big governor's races. We're concentrating mostly on Congress because we want to know what the politics of the coming caucuses will be.

MS. LIASSON: Right, right. And one other quick question. In terms of the right and right-wing media being the assignment editor for the political conversation in America, which is what you just described.

MS. KAMARCK: Yeah.

MS. LIASSON: You know, infrastructure is boring. What is the solution to that? I mean you sound kind of fatalistic, like really? I mean if your bridge is falling down, that's not so boring, that's kind of (laughter) existential. So, what's the solution to that?

MS. KAMARCK: I'm not sure there really is a solution, which is why — you

know, I've been at this for a long time and there's sort of never — believe me, you're talking to the person who ran Reinventing Government for —

MS. LIASSON: Yeah, I know.

MS. KAMARCK: Quite consequential and, boy, oh, boy, we never got ink. So anyway, I mean I think part of that — the Democrats I think this time have caught a lucky break, so to speak, in that the abortion decision is consequential and it is not boring and it is something that unlike the Telecommunications Act or the Infrastructure Act, it is something everybody understands, everybody has a point of view on, and I think the Democrats are probably — the wind at their back is probably because of that. I'm sure we going to talk late.

So, one non wonky issue could in fact save the Democrats this time around.

MS. LIASSON: Let me turn to John and Ramesh about what are your thoughts, what are your big takeaways from the 2022 primary season.

Ramesh, why don't you start?

And what does it tell you about the Republicans?

MS. PONNURU: Well, first let me say thank you for having me. I should note that the description at the beginning of me as being one of conservatism's foremost intellectuals was not written by me. I did not put that in the bio. (Laughter)

MS. LIASSON: I wrote it, I wrote it.

MS. PONNURU: Although I'm not objecting to it either.

So, I think that there are a few takeaways, both from the primaries and from Elaine's very interesting analysis of it.

First, we should talk about Donald Trump — just as he would want us to do. And I would caution that Trump has manipulated Elaine's statistics, probably not thinking of her particularly, but he is trying to pad his numbers by endorsing a lot of people who were at the finish line without him. That doesn't mean that he isn't a big player, maybe even deserves the king maker title. But I would note a couple of things.

One, you know, as you'd expect, he does better when there's an incumbent, he's endorsing an incumbent. Two, he does better when it's not a serious race.

MS. LIASSON: When they're both named Erik.

MS. PONNURU: Yeah, right.

MS. LIASSON: They're both named Erik.

MS. PONNURU: And, you know, right, he rescinded an endorsement in the Senate race in Alabama because his candidate was losing — although he of course came up with a pretext for that, so which I think created a lot of problems for people trying to compile the statistics about how you count that. Trump's endorsement matters more than the endorsement of any other figure in the Republican Party. And in that sense, obviously, he is very important. But his candidates are not guaranteed winners and some ways he's followed kind of a small c, conservative strategy in making his endorsement.

Now, second, one thing that people talk a lot — not here, but in general about Trumpism and whether candidates are moving to embrace that as well as dropping his name. And I think there's a problem there, which is that Trumpism resists definition, that some people use it to mean something ideological about protectionism or a relatively restrained/isolationist foreign policy and anti-immigration. Some people mean it as a kind of rhetorical stance of taking every opportunity to punch liberals, verbally at least, hopefully not physically. Although the line is getting a little blurrier than it used to be.

And from watching the primaries, the thing that strikes me as how little there has been any resolution to the internal ideological debates of the right, and frankly how little debate there has been about any of those sort of internally divisive issues, everything has ended up revolving, as it has for the last six years, around the personality of Donald Trump.

And then, third, one absence in the primaries that I think is interesting — I think sort of shows up in an absence in Elaine's slides — you'll notice that when you were categorizing the Republicans there was a lot of MAGA Republican or non MAGA Republican, do you mention Trump or do you not mention Trump, whereas the categorization for Democrats was progressive or main stream Democrat. And it's not so much Biden Democrats. Biden really isn't looming large over this midterm in the way the incumbent presidents usually do. And I think this has been really difficult for a lot of political

analysts because it's been 30 years since we've had a president who was not sort of the huge main character in American politics. And in some ways, Biden even as the incumbent president, is less of the main character than the previous president who's out of office. And that I think also explains why some of the dynamics of this primary — excuse me — of this midterm election may be a little different than what we're used to in a midterm.

MS. LIASSON: John, what do you think about that?

MR. HUDAK: Sure.

MS. LIASSON: This is a race all about Trump again?

MR. HUDAK: Yeah. I mean I agree largely with what Ramesh said, particularly the last point about Biden not being the central figure of the midterm elections, which I think most Democrats across America are grateful for. I think if we were talking more about President Biden individually, Democrats who are running far ahead of the president's job approval ratings, like John Fetterman and Ralph Warnock and others, would be pretty angry that that's what the election was about. I think the best thing for Democrats is that — as Ramesh said, that the political conversation is about the previous president and not the sitting president.

But back to some of Elaine's data. Elaine made a great point, which was that Republicans are constantly trying to paint Democrats as these radical socialists. And as Elaine's data indicate, that just isn't the case. Most Democrats running for Congress, both House and Senate, and frankly Democrats running for office across the United States, are not the radicals that Republicans make them out to be. But in politics that doesn't need to be true for people to believe it's true. And Republicans have been masterful in scaring voters about a variety of issues, whether it's gender-neutral bathrooms or drag queens reading books to children, or a variety of cultural issues that scare people about what America is becoming, what it once was, how that has frayed. And in the process, they've convinced voters that Joe Biden is a socialist. Now, those of us who have been observing American politics for some time, some of us longer than others, the idea that Joe Biden is a socialist is laughable. It would also be laughable among radical Democrats and the

Republican Party. They see Biden — you know, a Bernie Sanders-style Democrat is going to see Biden probably closer to a mainstream Republican than to a socialist. And that's probably accurate. But voters bought into this.

But as Elaine indicated, the idea that Republican radicalism is real really came through on June 24 of this year when the Dobbs decision came out and American voters were able to see what was a decades-long effort on the right to overturn Roe. And that's an issue that is perceived and understood by voters across the political divide as radical and out of step with mainstream public opinion. And people can actually think about what the reversal of Roe means for their everyday lives, for their daughters, for their grandchildren, et cetera. And that is easier for a voter to understand than the message that Joe Biden is a socialist.

And so, that reversal of the ability to brand a party in a certain way has really happened and it hasn't happened because of anything any Democrat in the United States has done. It happened because of what six Supreme Court justices did and it's going to be an incredibly influential part of the midterm election. And the analogy constantly being thrown about the Hobbs decision is that the dog finally caught the car. And we're seeing that increasingly every day in — the major polling organizations across the United States are running out of superlatives to use about what they are seeing in terms of this groundswell and the shift in American politics and what should be a magnificent year for Republicans likely will not be that significant of a year.

And very quickly at the end, I think the biggest threat the Hobbs decision has politically is not even necessarily to the Republican Party writ large, it's to Donald Trump's role as the king maker. If the red wave that was supposed to — that was predicted a year ago to happen ends up fizzling, and a lot of Donald Trump's endorsed candidates end up losing, I don't think people will be running in and genuflecting at the altar of Trump in 2023 and 2024 in the same way because they're going to perceive the power of his endorsement as significantly less than it was just a year ago.

MS. LIASSON: Yup.

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MS. KAMARCK: Can I add one thing?

MS. LIASSON: Yes, go ahead, Elaine.

MS. KAMARCK: Just one quick think on John's point.

We've had four special elections this year where they actually pitted Democrats and Republicans. In every single one of them, the Republican ran behind Trump's numbers from 2020 and the Democrat ran ahead of Joe Biden's numbers. So, I think that goes to this issue of the two principals and where they stand in their parties.

MS. LIASSON: Yup. We've already kind of moved onto the November general election. That's where we're going next. Before we continue that discussion, I want to remind the audience they can submit questions via Twitter @Brookingsgov with #PrimariesProject, or you can email your questions to Events@Brookings.edu.

So, I want to ask you a question, what John just described is kind of the curse of being a minority party. You control all these institutions, but you haven't convinced hearts and minds. You don't have majority public opinion behind you on abortion or climate change or same sex marriage, but because of the structure of our system that rewards minority rule, they are in charge.

So, I guess my question for you is what do you think is going to be the driving issues of this year's midterm elections? In other words, is it going to be inflation, which is — and immigration, which is what the Republicans want, or will it be abortion and the extreme nature of a lot of the Republican party? And second, how important will Biden and Trump be personally in November?

So, I guess what I'm asking you is can Democrats do something that's really hard to do, very rarely done in a midterm — change an election that's supposed to be a referendum on the party in power into a choice election?

What do you think?

MS. KAMARCK: Call on one of us. (Laughing)

MS. LIASSON: Elaine.

MS. KAMARCK: Okay. So, I'll start.

I think Democrats can do that in the Senate races. I'm not sure they can do it in the House races, okay. I think the Senate races because it's the whole state. You can see situations even in red states where enormous turnout from university towns, among women, among suburban women, those turnouts can switch the dynamic in the state and maybe save some Democrats who were vulnerable and maybe even say in Pennsylvania, put in a Democrat in the place of a Republican senator. So, I think the Senate is definitely a place.

The House I think is more difficult just because of the overwhelming number of seats that are safe. So, I do think we will see, as we saw in those special elections, the Democratic margins shrink between the Democrats and the Republicans in many of those red districts, but I think they're still going to be red districts.

Now, as to Biden and Trump themselves, you know, Trump keeps — he's like — we can't stop watching him, right. I mean he just sucks the air out of the political space. And even the fact that he has ongoing controversies, right, keeps him front and center. So, I'm going to defer to Ramesh on Trump. I think for Biden this has been very good luck, because let's face it, why did we elect Biden in the first place? Because everybody was kind of sick of all the nuttiness and all the weirdness and all the chaos of the Trump presidency. So by keeping Trump front and center, good old steady, boring Joe looks good, looks good. So, I think he will be an advantage in that instance.

MS. LIASSON: So, on the Biden meter, boring – good, senile – bad.

MS. KAMARCK: Right. (Laughter)

MS. LIASSON: More boring is better.

So, Ramesh and John, do you think the House is a done deal for Republicans, Senate still a jump ball?

MS. PONNURU: I wouldn't say that the Senate is a — excuse me — the House is a done deal. I would say that Republicans look less likely to have a big margin in the House after the election, but still look pretty likely to have control. Perhaps narrow control. Governors' races are more individuated than the Senate races and the Senate

racers are more individuated than the House ones. As Elaine said, I think a people who go show up to vote learn who the House candidates are when they show up to vote. And that's a little different than the way they approach other kinds of races.

As for sort of what the driving issue is, which I think was your initial question here, I mean I think that's very much what the substance of the political debate is about. You know, two months ago I think a lot of people believed — and Republicans were happy — that it seemed like gas prices and inflation were going to be the top issue, and right now we're hearing more discussion and more Democratic hope that it's going to be abortion and Trump. There's still some — you know, obviously early voting changes the way campaigns run, but there is still some time I think for focuses to shift and to blur. I do think that Republicans were sort of expecting everything to stay exactly the same. And I wonder if Democrats aren't making the same mistake right now, because, you know, I think even the polling on abortion shows, depending on the poll you look at, 13 percent of the public thinks it's the top issue in this race. That's a big number by historical standards, but it's still 13 percent. And, yes, inflation and gas prices are coming down. It doesn't necessarily mean people are going to be happy with where they are during this fall. And you could get at — you know, we could have a very different discussion if we get economic numbers that show shrinkage in the third quarter. None of which is to say, yay, Republicans have it made, it's just to say, you know — to counsel some humility on all our parts about what choices voters make and what is in fact going to be foremost on their minds.

MS. LIASSON: John?

MR. HUDAK: Yeah, so I agree with Ramesh. I think that the — it's not necessarily a done deal that the House is going to be Republican, that the Senate will remain Democratic. A lot can change. I mean we still have a couple of months. In this political environment a day is a lifetime, so a couple of months is an eternity and a lot can shift very quickly. Obviously, as I said, the abortion issue is going to be pretty strong, but something that was really interesting to me, a couple of weeks ago a poll came out that said the number one issue voters are thinking about right now in the United States are threats to

democracy. As a political scientist that's pretty fascinating because a threat to democracy for us is a pretty easy to understand concept, but it's not as easy to understand as abortion or inflation. It's a pretty complex idea that typically voters are not responding to in as active a way as concerns about the economy or concerns about terrorism or concerns about war, easier to digest issues. If that remains to be a driving issue in this election — and I'm not convinced it will be — but if it remains a driving issue, it's going to start to seep into races across the United States, including House races that will be more difficult for Republicans to win in a lot of swing districts.

That said, even if Republicans retake the House, the next two years are going to be challenging, particularly if the Republican majority is narrow. If we're talking about a five or six seat majority, first, it's going to be incredibly hard for them to select a speaker. I don't think Kevin McCarthy has that type of unified support within the Republican conference in the House that he would have if he had a 15 or 20 seat margin.

At the same time, governing with that narrow of a margin in a conference that is fairly fractured is going to be difficult for McCarthy. I think we look back at House leaders who have been extraordinarily powerful in commanding majorities, in commanding support for a legislative agenda, I think few are as talented at that as the current speaker, Nancy Pelosi. But if we look back a half a generation and we look at someone like Tom DeLay, the Republican majority leader in the House, he was able to keep the House conference in line fairly effectively. Kevin McCarthy is no Nancy Pelosi and he's no Tom DeLay. And I think the Republican prospects of governing under a narrow majority in the House will likely leave them with the ability to investigate the Biden Administration and very little else to show after two years, which will make it very difficult to sell the American public on the idea that they should be given the House, the Senate, and the presidency in 2024.

MS. LIASSON: And then it's not just the narrowness of the majority, if they just get the majority, it's the changing nature of the conference. I mean talk about that a little. It's not just they might have a narrow majority; they've got a ton of Trumpists and more extreme Republicans in that new majority if they win.

MR. HUDAK: Well, that's right. And to Elaine's point, the shift to the right among House and Senate candidates among Republicans is significant. And so, you look out at the landscape — and this is true of any party hoping to switch from the minority to the majority — you don't know the deck of cards you are going to be playing with come January because you don't know who is going to win and lose. So, you can imagine really extreme right-wing candidates who are going to come in and try to rock the boat in the way that some new Republican House members — Marjorie Taylor Green, Lauren Boebert, others, have done effectively. Those two individuals in particular and representatives like them, are headaches for the leadership of the Republican Party. Kevin McCarthy doesn't know yet how many more headaches he is going to have in January or whether those individuals will be so far right wing that they will label Kevin McCarthy a RINO and won't support him for speaker.

And so, we don't know, as you alluded to, Mara, we don't now, (a), if Republicans will take the House and, (b), we have no idea what that will look like, what the goals, what the efforts, what the interests will be. And neither does Kevin McCarthy right now. And that has to be fairly terrifying for a man whose lifelong goal of becoming speaker might be realized over a conference which will drive him insane day after day.

MS. LIASSON: Right. Beware of what you wish for, you just might get it.

I want to ask Ramesh and Elaine to comment on something that John said about that poll that showed 69 percent of Democrats and 69 percent of Republicans think that democracy is in crisis. Now, obviously, they think that for different reasons, but that is — if there's no better measure of how polarized we are than that data point. The huge numbers of each party I assume think the other party is a threat to democracy. So, what effect will that have on the November elections?

Ramesh?

MS. PONNURU: So, a couple of things. First, I think that there's an objective basis for the concern. And I think in particular that there are some secretary of state races that need to be watched out for. You know, in terms of like actual threats to

democracy, I think that that is the most live problem, that you've got people running to be election officials who are not committed to seeing out and doing the will of the voters. And I think frankly, to switch into legislative rather than campaign talk, it's one of the reasons why I think that it ought to be an important item of business that Congress work on the Electoral Count Act in the next few weeks before this Congress is over with.

But I wanted to make a point about the polarization that we've in various ways been alluding to during this discussion. And we talk as a sort of kind of shorthand about the Republican Party moving right and becoming extreme, but I just want to note what it sort of means to be more right is different than it used to be. I mean if we think about — let's say Oz replaces Toomey in Pennsylvania and Vance replaces Portman in Ohio. Well, in some respects, like if you're talking about taxes, corporate tax rates, individual income tax rates, entitlement programs, and so forth, in some respects that a move to the left. And I make that point just to say that is — maybe — that — you know, how that looks to a voter is going to be different. If you're a working class non college educated voter, in some ways Vance and Oz may look to you like they're more moderate than earlier generations of Republicans. College educated voters are in general going to think about it differently. And I think that's also something that we should keep in mind when we think about these races.

MS. LIASSON: Wait, you're assuming that Vance and Oz are not going to have a kind of pro corporate, pro wealthy agenda when it comes to economics? Because that's not always the case. There can be a lot of populous rhetoric and then they still vote like Mitt Romney.

MS. PONNURU: That's right, but I would say — look, Portman and Toomey, it was clear — entitlement —

MS. LIASSON: (Inaudible) and they were — yes. They —

MS. PONNURU: That was why they were in politics, right. It's not why Vance and Oz are in.

MS. LIASSON: Yeah, yeah.

MS. PONNURU: And they're talking very differently. And I do think that that

matters, especially when some of those things can't actually come to fruition unless people are willing to take leadership roles on them.

MS. LIASSON: Yeah. Let's talk — you talked about the threats to democracy, and you pointed to secretary of state candidates who have basically said that they would like to throw out the 2020 results, they don't believe they were real. The problem is that 69 percent of Republicans who said they see democracy in crisis, a lot of them I assume — John, you can tell us — are election deniers. In other words, the reason they think democracy is in crisis is because they think the last election was stolen.

MS. PONNURU: Mm-hmm.

MR. HUDAK: Yeah, that's absolutely right. And I think it points to something else that we don't know about what's going to happen this November, and it's around what type of crisis we're going to have at the state level and at the — frankly at the level of the electorate as well. And one of the questions that came in during this panel was from a policy advisor in the Michigan House of Representatives asking what the challenge is when one-third of Republicans on the ballot this November don't believe that the 2020 election was legitimate. That's a problem. But I think the bigger problem is going to be what will they say about the 2022 election. Does this anger about election legitimacy — and let's call it what it is — this made-up anger about election legitimacy, this nonsensical lie that has been pedaled by Donald Trump and others about election integrity, or the lack thereof, whether that rose in nature, whether it gets more aggressive, whether it gets more violent in nature. That's a problem. So, you have a lot of election deniers running for office who, unless they are elected, will continue to deny elections. There is this idea of the election is a fraud if I don't win. And Donald Trump has been the king maker of that argument for sure. And he has minions that are going to continue that argument and they'll be angry. Those candidates will be angry. But if that 69 percent of Republicans becomes 89 percent of Republicans or the 69 percent of Republicans becomes more rabid with those feelings, so they strongly believe it rather than somewhat believe it, it creates a real existential threat to the American system. And it's something that I think we're talking — not us here, but in

general — the political conversation, we're often times talking vaguely about threats to democracy. This is a serious threat to democracy that Republican leadership has been complicit in allowing to fester. But the adults in the Republican Party need to stand up and say more powerfully than they did in 2020 at the end of this election that the votes were counted properly, the elections had integrity, and the results are the results. And if Republican leadership doesn't begin to try to right the ship, as I said, the threat to democracy not just vaguely but very specifically will increase and will only become worse in future election cycles.

MS. LIASSON: Just before we turn to questions, Elaine, I want to ask you about that. I mean we're not talking about the threat to democracy in the person of Donald Trump maybe becoming the president again, we're talking about something that can happen this fall either with Republicans refusing to acknowledge that they lost an election or election deniers getting into these key positions where they are going to be in charge of counting and certifying votes in the next election. And we already saw January 6. Is that the future here? And, I guess I have the other question that John raised about Republican leaders, either they don't want to get death threats, or they think they can manage this energy. But they're certainly not leading.

MS. KAMARCK: No, they're certainly not leading. And I agree with John, it's a real problem and it's a real shame on them moment.

We don't really know yet how real this is, okay. We've had special elections in primaries and virtually none of them have had this kind of election denier business going on. I mean, you know, we have been having elections all year long, some of them very close. And the winners were winners and the losers were losers. There wasn't this attack on the system. So, one of the — you know, if you're an optimist, you — on the optimistic side you say, okay, this was uniquely presidential, unique to 2020, unique to the craziness of Donald Trump and a bunch of states that were trending Democratic anyway, finally flipping, okay — I'm thinking of Arizona and Georgia here —and it will go away.

The flip side of that if these deniers get it and if they have an agenda that

really does undermine the outcomes, then we have a very, very serious problem. And I think the first place — you know, the test is going to be suppose that control of the Senate or control of the House hangs by one race and it's a very tight race, right. Hangs by a Florida, for instance. Then we're going to see this paranoia, this distrust of the system. I think it's going to come roaring right back and we could be in for real trouble.

MS. LIASSON: All right. Speaking of Florida, let's go to questions from our audience.

One question is how important will the findings and the FBI removals of documents in Mar-a-Lago be for the midterms?

MR. HUDAK: I'll jump in their, Mara.

You know, I think this will certainly — this issue in general will certainly rile up some of the most ardent supporters that President Trump has and motivate them to come out and voter for more election deniers and send him money to pay for a billionaire's legal bills, et cetera. But I do think there is still in the Republican Party a more traditional type of Republican. The Republican who's committed to investing in national defense and what is sometimes referred to as a neocon, although I think that label doesn't include all of the Republicans that I'm talking about here, but a traditional — like a George H.W. Bush Republican. They're going to look at President Trump's mishandling of top-secret compartmentalized information, documents, and data as treasonous. Like let's be honest — as a real threat to how our system works and a threat to national defense. And those are people who Republicans need to win these House raises and win these Senate races. They need to turn out and vote for Republicans. If they stay home — they're probably not going to out and vote for liberal Democrats, but they stay home, that's a real challenge for Republicans.

And so I think even if it's 10 percent of Republicans who are going to look at the findings of the investigation into President Trump — not even the January 6 hearings, but these findings about the mishandling of top secret information as determinative about whether they are going to vote or not, that can be devastating this fall for Republicans and

will certainly factor into the Republican primary for president in 2024.

MS. LIASSON: Another question we've got is what does governance look like if Republicans have the House and the Senate is still Democratic?

MS. KAMARCK: We're at a stalemate; right? Let's face it, we're just at a stalemate. Nothing very — nothing that either party really wants can move forward. On the other hand, you know, there will be — lost in all of this drama that our politics is, is the fact that we actually — you know, that the Congress passed a lot of things. They passed something with Republican votes. They've done some good things on high tech, they've done some good things protecting our national interest in terms of trade, they've done some good things on infrastructure. So, my guess is that we'll get some of those boring issues that nobody likes to talk about, we'll actually get passed and covered, but there will be a stalemate on a lot of big issues, like immigration, abortion right, et cetera.

MS. PONNURU: Well, but there will also be brinkmanship on other things, on issues where there is must pass legislation, in part because a lot of other legislation won't be getting passed. Everybody is going to want to attach their priorities to things like the basic spending bills. And so, I think that things like partial and temporary government shutdowns become much more likely in the next two years if there's divided government.

MS. LIASSON: And what's the political implications of that? Government shutdowns have generally not worked well for the party shutting down the government.

MS. PONNURU: Yeah. I mean a lot of it depends on who is seen as the person causing it. There's usually a sort of argument about that and there's usually some — you know, one party that is more sort of positioned itself to say, yeah, let's shutdown the government. Typically, but not always, that has been the Republicans. The Democrats had a government shutdown over immigration issues during the Trump years, which they didn't win. But, yeah, a lot of that remains to be seen.

You know, one thing as just maybe a slight point of disagreement. John earlier was saying something about how the House is not going to likely, especially if it's narrow, amass a record of governing that is going to help it with its argument in 2024. And I

just — I basically don't believe that a record of passing a lot of legislation is going to have an effect one way or the other on the 2024 elections. I think if the Republicans come across as crazy and the Republican presidential nominee comes across as sort of sharing that craziness, that's one thing. But I actually don't think that there's a ton that they need to pass. And in some ways, not passing things might end up being better for them, particularly if it makes — if it widens fissures in the Democratic Party and makes more Democrats impatient or disappointed with the performance of the Democratic presidency.

MS. LIASSON: We have just a few minutes left, and I want to ask an audience question about what are the things that make you optimistic that our democracy will survive? And what are the things that are most important to do to return to a more healthy civic debate and a more resilient Democratic system.

MR. HUDAK: Well, you know, I'll — oh, sorry, go on, Elaine.

MS. KAMARCK: That's okay.

I have two words — the courts. Okay. I think even the Republican judges have in fact acted according to the rule of law. Even this judge that just called for the special master. Frankly, I see all the legal back and forth about it, but given the enormity of this and given the suspicion in the population about our system, taking a pause, showing every deference to Trump on this — because let's face it, as John said, he could be the first American president accused of treason — taking a pause, going slowly on this is probably the judicious thing to do. So, the courts — as far as I can tell, the courts, including the Trump judges, are a cause for optimism.

MR. HUDAK: Quickly, Mara, you know, I agree with what Elaine said. And it is true that there are a lot of election deniers on the ballot this November, running for governor, running for secretary of state. And that's a really serious problem. But in 2020 — we've been talking a lot about election deniers and support for Trump and the Party and his ideas, but in 2020 a lot of Republican elected officials did the right thing. Governors and secretaries of state across the country, in Georgia and Arizona and elsewhere, did what they were supposed to do, and that was their job, to preserve democracy and to continue to do

what is right and to count the votes and to certify elections.

And so, while, yes, there are individuals running for office in the Republican Party who present threats to that democracy, it's important to remember there are a lot of Republicans, voters, and elected officials, who recognize the value of the democracy and do everything in their power to try to preserve it. And we've seen, especially in the investigations around January 6 and elsewhere, these individuals have been threatened, they have paid politically for this, whether it's a House speaker in Wisconsin or a secretary of state in Georgia, but ultimately they did it right. And I think too often we focus on the threats, and it's important to do that, but also, we've seen some real profiles encourage among Republicans in 2020 and it shows that the Party is not lost, and because of that the democracy is not either.

MS. LIASSON: Ramesh?

MS. PONNURU: Well, I would say President Biden and the Democratic Party writ large are not acting as though they believe that there is a great crisis of democracy and a great threat to democracy. Their tactical decisions in particular suggest that they think that tying Republicans to Trump — that Trump is more of an asset to them than a threat. And these are smart political pros and maybe they're right.

MS. LIASSON: Wait, what would they be doing if they did think there was a real crisis?

MS. PONNURU: Well, they would not be, for example, intervening to help Republican primary candidates who are election deniers, they wouldn't be helping to defeat people like Peter Meijer in Michigan who voted for impeaching Trump.

MS. LIASSON: So, their cynicism tells you that they're not as scared (laughter) as the headlines tell us we should be?

MS. PONNURU: Yeah, that's right.

MS. LIASSON: Okay. I think we are at the end of our hour, which went by really, really quickly and it was a wonderful discussion. I want to thank Ramesh Ponnuru, Elaine Kamarck, and John Hudak and all of the thoughtful participants out there who sent us

questions. And we'll look for you in November when I'm sure all of us will be hashing over the results.

Thanks for joining us.

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