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BUSETTE: So good afternoon, everybody, and good morning, if we're, I guess on the West Coast. I'm Camille Busette, I'm the interim vice president of Governance Studies here at Brookings, and it gives me great pleasure to welcome all of you here in the room and everyone who has joined us online to this conversation with Amy Walter and David Wasserman. One of Washington's most powerful women in 2023 and 2021, and we hope, in 2024, Amy Walter, is the publisher and editor-in-chief of The Cook Political Report with Amy Walter, where she provides analysis of the issues, trends and events that shape the political environment. We are also joined by David Wasserman, her colleague, who is the senior editor and elections analyst for the Cook Political Report with Amy Walter and is recognized as one of the nation's top election forecasters. So welcome to you both.

WALTER: Thank you.

BUSETTE: So, I think before President Biden dropped out, probably the life of a political pollster was a little less interesting. But now everybody wants you. So we are thrilled that you are here at Brookings. David, I wanted to start with you. And, let's talk a little about what's happened since President Biden's exit from the race. So at that point, early polls suggested that Vice President Harris was closing the initial gap between, between the then-President Biden and former President Trump. So where are we now and how confident can we be that we are seeing a trend?

WASSERMAN: Well, first, thank you, Camille, and it's good to see such a big crowd here. Apparently, and now we're back to crowd size, so, now we can we can boast that, you know, got a lot of interest. So if we were to put the 2024 election in Netflix terminology, a month ago, Republican consultants were boasting to us that Democrats were running a "Weekend at Bernie's" campaign where they were hiding the candidate, then somehow we got on to "Silence of the Lambs." And I don't want to say that we're quite at "Miss Congeniality," but we are witnessing one of the most remarkable turnarounds in a candidate's image that we've seen in in some time. It was just several weeks ago that Kamala Harris was in the FiveThirtyEight average at 36% favorable to 54% unfavorable, which was below where both Trump and Biden were. And it was a year ago that we were fielding questions from folks about whether Joe Biden should ditch Kamala Harris from the ticket. And it's not as if, as if he got, it's not as if she got dramatically more popular by the time he dropped out of the race. It was that he had fallen below where she was. And yet, in the time since he dropped out, we have witnessed her get to 43-49, which by today's standards seems absolutely smashing.

WALTER: That is popular.

WASSERMAN: That's right. And as our friend Nate Cohn wrote a couple days ago, basically qualifies her as a generic Democrat. And the euphoria you're, you're seeing among Democrats is really relief. But among independent voters, there is also some relief that it's no, we're no longer trapped in this geriatric showdown, right. There has been something to shake up this dynamic that we've been living with for the first half of the year. And so this honeymoon period where she has taken a narrow lead in our polling average and basically every polling average by about a point, and we're still kind of, you know, drilling down on these swing states, which we'll talk about. But I think it has a lot to do with the fact that the Trump campaign and Republicans have squandered the past few weeks' opportunity to define her and fill in the gaps for people who, who don't have that strong an impression either way of her. And that's because there's been a messaging dilemma on that side between those who want to characterize her as unserious and laughing Kamala and those who want to focus on the substance of the positions she took to the left of Joe Biden when she was running for president in 2020 and frame her as Liberal Kamala. And so far, that messaging jumble on the Republican side has created an opportunity for for her not to necessarily seize the middle, but to seize the momentum and, and, and come across more favorably to, to voters.

WALTER: Yeah, I think that's a great way to put it. And, you know, or to take a meme, perhaps, she's in many ways unburdened by what has been, which is quite again, quite remarkable. And it is, not just the fact that she is no longer seen as, as tied, or she's no longer as tied to opinions of Biden as she was back when she was the vice president. Whether it is on issues, handling certain issues or characteristics, she's in a better position than Biden is, I think -- or was. I think that David's point is a very good one. She's she is a new person who's in the mix, even though there's nothing new about her. She's been the sitting vice president. So she comes into the race in some ways with the burden of incumbency, and yet that burden hasn't been as heavy as one would of assumed, given that, you know, Biden was really struggling not just with his favorable rating, but opinions about how well he'd do as president. Now, I think she's also been helped not just by the fact that Republicans seem to have a challenge, a messaging challenge. I think they, too, thought that the polls that they were seeing pre-Biden dropping out were going to hold, that she'd come into the race deeply unpopular, that people held a very low opinion of her, whether she was smart enough or whether she was capable enough to be able to do this job. The polls that we've seen over the last few days really have upended that theory. So there was some, I don't know if it was hubris or hope that she was going to be as weak, if not a weaker candidate. And she's also been more successful in staying on message. This is why

you have, this weekend, if you saw JD Vance, he was on every single Sunday show. What was he saying? Come on, Kamala, come on out, show us your positions, get off the script. Didn't he went and didn't he stalk her plane at one point, trying to get her to come out and talk to him? And the point there being we can't let her keep defining herself in these well thought-out, crafted teleprompter types of rallies. We need to get her off the cuff. We need to get her in front of the media. We need to get her answering questions. So she's been successful in being able to to stay out of that. And the second is that Trump has not been successful, staying on message, which she was incredibly, we called it disciplined in the campaign, being focused. I think a lot of that was driven by the fact that he was winning. And when you're winning, everybody's great. When you're not winning, everything's terrible. Right? And so that's when he has his, you know, his, his worst instincts come out in terms of the ways that he decides he wants to get the campaign back into his, into his favor. And, you know, the Democrats had been saying for months that there were enough anti-Trump voters out there. They, they just needed to get Donald Trump in the spotlight to remind them of what they didn't like about Donald Trump. Harris has been able to do in ten days what Biden had trouble doing in a year and a half.

BUSETTE: So that sounds like, Kamala Harris has benefited from a number of, sort of messaging difficulties on the Republican side, an opportunity to redefine herself, obviously the enthusiasm for her candidacy is translated into more likability, etc.. And so obviously, she's closing the gap between herself and former President Trump in the national polls. How is that translating in the swing states, Amy or David?

WALTER: Yeah. Why don't you start, David off?

WASSERMAN: Yeah, it's a great question. This has become this has gone from being a very static year to a very volatile period, and I don't think we're out of it yet. We're going to see a lot of gyrations in the polls in the weeks to come. But based on what we know about, about the demographic structure of this race, Kamala Harris has recovered ground that Joe Biden had seen eroding among three key groups: Black voters, Latino voters, and 18 to 29 year old voters, all of which we had seen huge drop off in in support between the share that Joe Biden and Kamala Harris got in 2020 and what we were seeing in the polls up until this point, and that means that the Sunbelt route is now open for for for Democrats to contend, Georgia, Nevada, Arizona, states where Trump was routinely ahead by more than five points before Biden got out of the race. And there was a fatalism that was about to set in for Democrats in those places that could have really cost Democrats down ballot. Because even though you had Democrats like Tammy Baldwin, and I'm sure we can get into

down ballot, but Bob Casey, they were running far ahead of Joe Biden in those northern Great Lakes states. It showed that voters there were not necessarily ready to embrace Republicans, but they were really down on Joe Biden. And now the Democratic enthusiasm, is on par with where Republicans are and brings those those southern battleground states into contention, which opens up more routes to 270 for Harris.

WALTER: That's right. And I think with women, too, is where she's also been able to open up the gender gap that that is, again, traditional what we've seen now for years with Democratic, with Democratic candidates getting more support from women. And that gap had narrowed considerably with Biden on the top of the ticket. She helped to break that open. And we're also seeing -- and again, this isn't surprising -- she's, seen as a, I don't know if it's that it's a more credible messenger or that she just has more authority on the abortion issue. That was an issue where Biden was ahead of Trump, but she has sort of broken that open to a much bigger lead.

BUSETTE: Great. Excellent. Where are we with respect to independents? What have we seen there?

WASSERMAN: Yeah. You know. I think we need to get used to thinking about our electorate in multiple dimensions. We're used to thinking about it on the kind of a left versus right spectrum. But my hobbyhorse this year has been high-engagement voters versus low-engagement voters, and independents tend to be much more prevalent among those who are more peripheral in how they consume political news and engage with politics, whereas partisans are supercharged and are mainlining, you know, Fox and CNN and MSNBC. The dynamic in the in the Trump-Biden race was, you know, when we went into these battleground states in May in partnership with BSG and GS Strategies – a Democratic firm and a Republican firm – what we found was that among the four out of four voters, in other words, voters who had participated in all four of the most recent federal elections, 16, 18, 20 and 22, Joe Biden was ahead by four, but among everyone else, Donald Trump was ahead by ten. And so what are we seeing today? Well, we're in the field and we're going to release our survey results in the middle of this week. But I suspect that most of Kamala's movement, positive movement, has come among that lower engaged group of voters. And the reasons that, you know, Donald Trump did a better job than Joe Biden of communicating with voters who don't tune in to traditional political channels. He showed up at at events like F1 races and UFC fights and even Sneaker Con. When the White House thought about taking a risk with Joe Biden, they'd put him on Late Night with Seth Meyers, but it didn't really do much. Kamala Harris is a much stronger pop culture candidate. Whether it's Megan Thee Stallion at her rally in Atlanta, or rumors or rumors about Beyonce coming to the DNC, or Taylor Swift campaigning for

her later in the year, she is connecting with voters who don't fit neatly on our left-right spectrum, but still vote at the end of the day than Joe Biden was doing. And the overwhelming perception among those voters is that Joe Biden could not serve another second term physically.

BUSETTE: Excellent. That's great for us to know. So more engaged and a little bit less engaged, and she's closing the gap among the folks who are less engaged.

WASSERMAN: That's right.

BUSETTE: That's great. Wanted to, I want to turn our attention to issues. So what are some of the issues that are top-of-mind for voters nationally?

WALTER: You know, this is, much in the way that that Dave had us think about the electorate in a way that isn't just, two dimensional or traditional. Issues become, an important way to think of them as, issues that are important to voters, but are they salient to their vote? Right. So you ask voters what's important to you? Well, the economy, absolutely. That is my number one issue. And yet some of those same voters who think the economy's not doing well or think Biden's not handling the economy well, are still going to vote for the Democrat, which doesn't seem to make much sense. Right. If the economy is working, you say the economy's not good, you don't like what the incumbent party's doing on the economy, yet you're still voting for Democrats. Clearly, it's not the issue that is driving them for their vote. It's important, but not necessarily salient. And I think this is where we get into this question for independents. So when you look at the list of the top issues and the top concerns for Democrats and Republicans, it's literally Venus, Mars, right? You know, for Democrats, democracy, abortion rights, for Republicans, crime, immigration, those are their main issues. And so the messages on some of those topics are going to go to partisans really to rev up the base, right? If you are already wearing a blue jersey or a red jersey, these are the messages that are going to ensure that you come out to vote. This is, you care about immigration. Is it the most important thing for you? Then you better come out because, you know, Kamala Harris is going to be terrible on the border, just like Democrats have been terrible on the border for the last four years, blah, blah, blah. Same with democracy. Was January 6th the most important thing to you? Well guess what, Donald Trump being back in office, etc. For independent voters, though, again, what we saw for some of our earlier polling was that, you know, they because they're less engaged in the, in partisanship, the way I describe independent voters is, similar to

Dave's of low engagement and, and/or to a person like myself who is, say, not really interested in NFL.

Okay, I know that there's a season of NFL football. I know there are teams.

BUSETTE: It's started by the way.

WALTER: Which is insane. This is how people feel about politics. Same thing. Like how could it be football season? They're still playing baseball. It's still sunny outside, right? It's not winter. All right. So I know there are teams. I know the names of the teams I know maybe like three players. One of them is left. So now that Tom Brady's gone I'm like, I don't know anybody else. I'm not following the day to day. I am not checking in on trades. I'm not part of a fantasy football league. But as as we get closer and closer to the playoffs now I'm paying more attention. Why? Well, because everybody around me is paying attention, right? People who I like are telling me things like, I'm so excited Baltimore is in it. I was like, I had no idea Baltimore was a good team. Apparently they are. So now I'm getting engaged and people around me are engaged, the media is engaged. And of course, I'm showing up to the Super Bowl parties, there are nachos there. It's fantastic. I'm not invested in the outcome, though. I don't remember who won last time. I honestly, I don't. So that's who these folks are. It's not that they don't care. It's not that they're not civic minded. It's not that they're not smart. It is just not a priority in their life to follow the day to day of politics. So what the issue that's important to them, I think you have to go to what are we talking about in September and October, when these people are starting to focus back in on politics, right. They say, why are you asking me about who I'm going to vote for? It is August. Why are we playing football? It's August. Come back to me in October. Now. Are we talking about the possibility of a recession in October? Are we talking about how great the economy's doing or something else? That's an important factor. Are we talking more about Donald Trump and his temperament and his behavior, or are we talking more about Harris and her positions on the issues? If this is an election where for those voters, it's more about Donald Trump, then that is an advantage for Kamala Harris. If the election is, hey, remember, four years ago, inflation was lower. We didn't have this crisis on the border. Don't you want to go back to that? Kamala Harris can't get us there. That's a benefit to, to Trump. So it's, it's not a, I'm not trying to evade the question, but I do think it's important to appreciate that where the lens is like I think some, reason what we don't, we haven't heard as much about immigration in the news cycle because we have had reduced border crossings. What if we have another spike going into the fall? That puts the spotlight, then that's what people are going to be getting through that whatever media they're consuming. And again, it's it's peripheral. They're not necessarily focusing in on it, but they're getting that information. And then they hear, "man, all this border stuff. And I've seen these ads Harris is bad on the border and we

don't have this with Trump." Oh okay. Right. You can see how those voters then get pushed into, more supporting Trump than they would Harris.

BUSETTE: So, voters are multi-dimensional. They vote, it turns out --

WALTER: Exactly. And humans are complicated. We are not robots.

BUSETTE: So, we've been hearing a lot about, certainly on the Harris side, about memes, coconut trees and brat, etc. What are we hearing on the Republican side? And are these signs of, of deeper engagement do you think are going to last, or what's your what's your what are your thoughts on that?

WASSERMAN: Yeah. You know, the Republican dilemma right now is exactly, you know, how do you how do you message in the swing states to define Kamala and tie her to the current administration? And there's a frustration among Republicans right now that she is not being regarded as part and parcel of the Biden administration and the status quo in her coronation as the new candidate in this race. And you are going to see, I think, spending parity between the campaigns between now and the election on the airwaves, because even if Kamala Harris is raising \$300 million, you can't buy much more airtime than has already been reserved. And that's one thing, by the way, that's different from the first half of the year when Democrats have the airwaves to themselves in a lot of these states. So what are Republicans going to say? Well, they're already highlighting her speeches in which she invoked Bidenomics and praised the administration and Joe Biden's handling of, of, of the economy. But then also, if Kamala Harris' momentum is going to be sustainable for the next 80 days, I think she's got to go a bit further than, than than what she's done so far to, to preempt Republican attacks on her as a radical. And whether it in whether we do see a series of policy speeches to articulate why she has changed her mind on things like a fracking ban or her own version of Medicare for all, or, you know, a, a, a pathway, or decriminalizing illegal border crossings and so forth. That will be key to how voters perceive her and whether she's able to weather the barrage of attacks to come. And I don't think her VP choice did anything to move her to the middle, even though Tim Walz has a stronger favorability in some of the early surveys than JD Vance. If you go back and look at the 2022 election results by county in Minnesota, it's not as if he had special appeal with rural voters in Minnesota, certainly not to the extent that Josh Shapiro was able to overperform in 2022 in Pennsylvania.

BUSETTE: So, in terms of policy issues, so it sounds like, so we're starting to hear a little bit about policy positions from the Harris-Walz campaign. We've heard a little bit from Trump prior to his selection of JD Vance. Are we going to hear more? As we turn the corner into September, when people really start paying attention, or what's your sense of the way the campaigns are, thinking about moving into this final stretch?

WALTER: Well, we've got this debate on September 10th, and so that is coming up very quickly. I hate saying that as somebody who, I love summer so very much. So even just saying September hurts me, and that and saying that it's around the corner. But just think about where we are. We've got this week, which, right now Harris is still enjoying a lot of wind at her back. The stories -- again, thinking about there are just the, the, the this, independent or non-engaged voter who is just seeing what's on around them if you're just perusing through media outlets, it's a pretty good story for her, right? Crowds lining up, waiting to hear her, big stadiums filled with people. And what you're hearing either online through memes or, he's even getting asked these in interviews is, cat ladies, and, right. So, JD Vance is trying to do what vice presidential candidates are supposed to do, which is be the attack dog, but he's having to answer for his own shortcomings and things that he has said in the past so, he doesn't get to, he's not as strong of a messenger in moving that message. He's still on defense, Democrats still on offense. So we go through this week assuming things stay this way. Then we go, starting Sunday, we're in Chicago, we have the DNC. That's another good week for, it's very difficult for the out-party to get any traction when one side has their convention. We come back. It's basically September, and then we go into the debate. So this is where, to your point, the policy questions need to be asked. And how they answer them is going to tell us a lot. And it will be probably the first time we get to see what Harris is like, in that format. Now, this is what Republicans were also really convinced of, and I think they're still moderately convinced of today is that, when once she gets off of the teleprompter, once she gets off the script, she struggles, and that her 2020 presidential performance was not great and was an indication of how challenged she is in those sorts of situations. Her first few months on, in the VP slot, right. She, just all of those together make them think, you know, she's not very good at this and will be able to blunt any all of this momentum that she has in something like a debate. However, if you watched that debate from June 27th, we talked a lot about, and understandably so, how terribly Joe Biden did. But it's not like Donald Trump was good, okay. He didn't do great. We're only not talking about Donald Trump because of the other person. Had that been -- both of them were men, all right. Then we would be still in this race with Joe Biden. So, that's number one. And number two, you know, look, we've all been around campaigns a long time. There are candidates who in their first go at it, they don't do so well, because it is hard running for president. Looks easy. Just ask any one of those governors, senators,

people who have had very high-profile, very high-pressure political jobs and they say, look at these guys, they're clowns, I could do this. And then they get up there and, whoops, it is not as easy as it looks. So, you know, having four years at the White House, having four years being steeped in that level of pressure. I think is something to think about when we go and try to manage expectations based on, you know, if you're just basing your expectations on what she looked like in 2019 and those first interviews she gave as vice president. That's fine, but it may, and that may be turn out to be the case, but there are a lot of years and now a lot of energy that has changed since then.

WASSERMAN: And you can't overstate how important it is that she was able to get the nomination this time without a primary.

WALTER: Yes.

WASSERMAN: And did not have to, I think a big problem in the 2020 campaign, she was so risk averse, she didn't want to alienate any segment of the Democratic coalition that it constantly seemed like she had her finger in the wind. And remember, let's have this conversation. I think it's worth having this conversation. You know, now she has the ability to move, to to appeal to a general election audience. And you're beginning to see her go on the attack on Democrats' weakest issue of the border and really go after Trump for scuttling the Senate immigration compromise. I think Democrats can afford to be underwater by 15 points on handling of the border and still win, but not 30 like they were two months ago. So we'll see.

WALTER: Yeah, I think that's a that's an excellent, excellent point to think about that. And that she's able to lean into prosecutor. She couldn't talk about being a prosecutor in 2019, that was a liability in a Democratic primary. Now it's, oh by the way did I mention I was a prosecutor? Oh, one more thing: prosecutor. Also a prosecutor. So, and even supporting the bipartisan immigration bill, what she does in that, that same ad where she's really playing defense on immigration by trying to play offense. You couldn't have supported that bill in 2019. You would have barely, you know, you would have come in last place in a Democratic primary holding that position on immigration of that Senate bill.

WASSERMAN: But you look at, but Democrats look at what happened, when Tom Suozzi beat Olympic or beat a Republican for Olympic gold medalist George Santos's seat and his strategy, when it came to

tackling, that that immigration issue by appealing to the middle, it worked. And so now it's popular with Democrats.

WALTER: Yup, well, that's a good point. It's popular because it worked. Not because they agree on the positions.

BUSETTE: Yeah. That's great. So, this is I think we've mostly been talking about domestic politics. There are obviously a lot of, events happening internationally. Things appear to be heating up even more, with Iran and Israel. How do you think that's going to impact, first of all, the sort of the, voters who are just starting to get engaged and how is that going to impact voters who are 18 to 29?

WASSERMAN: Yeah. You know, there's no doubt that Joe Biden's problems with 18- to 29-year-old voters preceded October 7th of last year, but it drove a wedge in a group of voters that Joe Biden had really needed to stick with him in order to beat Donald Trump. Now we are seeing the, I think the movement we've seen from Harris has primarily come out of the undecided and third-party column. We've seen RFK to some extent collapse, but we are also not seeing as much energy on the anti-war left protest vote side as we were when Joe Biden was still in the race. And that's been an advantage for her because she is not as closely associated with the administration's policies towards Israel and Gaza as Joe Biden himself is. And we'll see if that remains, we'll see if it is a big segment of the debate on September 10th. And there are vulnerabilities for Republicans when it comes to foreign policy, whether it is on tariffs or JD Vance's position, that is in many cases more isolationist than Donald Trump's.

BUSETTE: So if you're a voter, you're having your summer holiday. You're not really thinking about the September 10th debate yet. What should we be paying attention to in the next few weeks?

WALTER: You mean if you're just a regular person? Regular, normal person?

BUSETTE: Yeah.

WALTER: Yeah. Enjoy a holiday. Don't think about politics. I mean, I think this is where the debate really has to go in, in these final weeks of any campaign, but certainly to reach those voters. What does this mean for me? Again, for partisans, they're looking through the lens of what does it mean for the party? What does it

mean for us winning? Right. Oh, this is actually good for us. Like the immigration issue, even though we may not really like the policy that much, it's good for us because we're winning on it. And then if we win, then we get control, and all of that. People who are just normal, are living their lives thinking, you know, actually, you guys should be working for me. That's the whole point. I vote for you because you're doing something for me. Now, the argument, from Democrats now is, look, we're now the party of joy and optimism, and Trump is, his message is just dystopian and angry. And voters want to vote for hope and optimism, not anger and retribution. There's probably something to be said for that, but I think it goes even farther than that, which is, who's going to be able to make the case that, I know your number one concern right now is that housing costs are too high. Groceries are too high. You're worried that you can't afford child care. This is how we're going to make life better for you. You're worried that your job isn't secure? We got your back. You're worried that your neighborhood's not safe? Here's what we're doing. That's what's going to get through to them. They aren't interested in relitigating the fights of 2020. They're not interested in going backwards. They really just are like, and I think that is some of the re-engagement on behalf of Harris. They just had kind of tuned Biden out. Now, if you're talking to them, they have to be able to say, you know why I'm voting? To, you know, if somebody asked them on the street, like, so, why are you voting for this candidate? Well, because, I feel like they're going to handle, you know, my, whatever the most concern is for them better than this other person.

BUSETTE: That's great. David, I have a question for you. So now we've talked about sort of the national, national race, presidential race. The trends that we're seeing, obviously we still have to turn the corner into September, but when does it when do the trends start to get enduring for down-ballot candidates?

WASSERMAN: It's a great question. You know, typically in presidential years, in the modern era, we see the down-ballot operate very similar to to the presidential race. I think 68 of the 69 most recent Senate elections in presidential years have gone the same way. And that's that, that state voted. And yet in 2016 and 2020, we saw Republicans down-ballot, I think, benefit from the assumption that many suburban independent voters made that Democrats were going to win the White House by a mile. That's what the polls showed in 16 and 20. And you had a number of those voters say, well, I may dislike Donald Trump personally, but I'm open to voting, particularly women. I'm open to voting for a more conventional Republican down-ballot. And so Republicans held the House in '16. They were able to surprise a lot of people and pick up a dozen House seats in 2020, nearly winning the majority that year. And yet, what we've seen all year is that Democrats, both Senate and House, have been running ahead of the top of the ticket. We're seeing we saw that by a lot when Biden was in the race. We're still seeing that play out with Kamala Harris in the race. I think part of it is

that these Democrats have had the time and money to establish themselves. They have much stronger images than Biden, had more moderate images, I think, than Harris has at the moment. But also, they were not 81 years old, and they were, they took advantage of a contingent of independent voters who want balance. And if they dislike both presidential candidates, and they expect that Donald Trump has a good chance to win the election, well, they don't want Trump going too far and having a blank check. And so that dynamic may have been operating a little bit in reverse. Now Kamala Harris is undoubtedly good news for Democrats, in the sense that base enthusiasm and turnout is going to be much more normal than it might have been had it fallen off the cliff, if Joe Biden had stayed in the race and that fatalism had set in. But the question is, if the expectations nationally shift and suddenly voters think, oh, well, maybe Harris can win this race, does some of that benefit, of of ticket balance then go away for people like, you know, your Bob Caseys and Tammy Baldwins and Jackie Rosens, who suddenly have a bigger lead, where it becomes trickier for Democrats in really red states like Jon Tester or Sherrod Brown.

WALTER: Yeah.

BUSETTE: Okay. Excellent. We, so and when everybody registered for this event, they have the option to send in questions. So we've gotten a lot of questions about the science of polling. So I want you to start us off by sort of just telling us what should laymen be looking for when they're looking at polls? They hear about all these different polls. What should they be looking for to understand whether the poll is reliable and whether they should pay attention to the poll?

WALTER: Why don't you start, given what we did with your idea on the national vote, how you put that together?

WASSERMAN: Yeah, so we came out a couple weeks ago with a national polling average and the cook report that just looks at 21 polls that we consider to have a record of, of transparency and reliability. And are there outliers among this group? Occasionally, yes. Statistically there will always be outliers. But what we're looking for is, have these pollsters articulated how they came about establishing a sample? Was it RDD was another methodology? Was it all online? Have they published crosstabs that show the subgroups of how they got to the results they show for their, their whole sample? And, are these people that we have gotten to know in terms of of the numbers they published in relation to the ultimate election results over the course of years? And so, one thing that I think people should be aware of is that response rates have fallen through

the floor, and it's made polling a lot more challenging for everyone who's engaged in the enterprise. It's not atypical that a that response rates to, a telephone poll, even if it's overwhelmingly cell phones these days, is sub-1%. And so what even even when you see a margin of error published in a news story, be aware that just as important is, is the response rate, and that we're relying on, in many cases, 1% of people who are bored enough to talk to a pollster or not sophisticated enough to screen their calls to accurately model what the other 99% of the country is thinking. And so it's remarkable that polling has been as accurate as it has been these past few years. Now, we have noticed sizable errors when Trump has been on the ballot in '16 and '20. Polls were generally more accurate when he was not on the ballot in '18 and '22. So I think we are in the dark with respect to what we'll see.

BUSETTE: Is it, are there particular groups that are harder to reach, when we do these national polls?

WASSERMAN: Yeah, typically the voters who are picking up the phone more or answering a web poll more are those who are most engaged in politics and have and have higher levels of social and institutional trust. I think this explains why we've seen the partisan non-response bias that has underestimated Trump supporters, because more than in any past era, one major party's support is correlated with distrust of big institutions.

BUSETTE: Very helpful. Well, Amy, anything you wanted to add?

WALTER: No, that was great. Let's get some questions.

BUSETTE: Right. So we are going to open, open up to audience, questions. I will just say one thing. We prefer a question as opposed to a statement. So, so if you can actually ask a question, that would be wonderful. So I'm going to open it up and we, and we have some -- please go ahead. We have some mics.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: The question is, has there been a president where, the president being shot at has affected the polls as drastically as we've seen in the last month or so?

BUSETTE: So I'm just going to repeat that just all it was a little low. Has had there been instances where an assassination attempt has changed the direction or the amplitude of the of the polls?

WALTER: Right. I think what's remarkable is to think about the fact that over a very, let's see here, what do we have? We have a three-week period of time. We went from –

BUSETTE: The debate.

WALTER: Well, we -- exactly. Let's do debate, to assassination attempt, to RNC, to Biden dropping out, to Harris wrapping up the nomination. Now, the polls have moved, but it depends on your version of drastic. Now, if you had told me 25 years ago, okay, these are the following things that happened. You would say, oh my gosh, yeah, you could see 10, 15, 20 point move, gosh, the polls have moved everywhere. Remember after 9/11 you see George W. Bush with a 90% approval rating? The polls have moved, but nationally they've moved four points basically in Kamala Harris's favor. Now, four points in this day and age with an incredibly polarized electorate that's basically calcified, four points is the whole ballgame. In some of these states, it's 1 or 2 points. Opinions about Trump have changed a little bit. I mean, his favorable ratings are higher now than they were when he was president. But it's not as if, again, you know, I think the theory being, oh, wow, if, someone almost dies, who is the nominee for the other, whatever party it is, that that is going to be just a major, you know, element to the conversation on the campaign. Nobody's really talking about it. And it didn't happen that long ago. It is amazing how quickly, with both our news cycles and the way in which voters are keying in to certain things. Honestly, the cat lady story has gotten more traction. You know, ladies with cats or whatever unmarried cat ladies has gotten more coverage than -- an online conversation -- than the assassination attempt did. And so I think, again, there's been more mainstream media coverage too, of of Congress looking into what happened, the role that the Secret Service did or did not play. All of this is still out there. But again, you would think based on how significant of an issue this was, it could have been a bigger media event and a bigger event in terms of its impact on the polling.

BUSETTE: Great, thank you for that question. Others? So we have, gentleman over here. Gentleman over here. Gentleman over here and over here. Ladies, please raise your hands as well.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Yes. My name is Roger Cochetti, and I'm an editorial contributor to The Hill newspaper. Most of your discussion about the voters has been people who vote based on an amalgam of economic or social issues or they relate to the candidate or they don't relate to the candidate. I wonder if you could expand on one sort of icon of American politics, which is the single-issue voting bloc. You haven't talked much about that. And recognizing that there is no such thing as 100% single issue, but let's call them

the 80 percenters or 85 percenters make up their mind on one issue. How significant is this single-issue vote? Are the single-issue voting blocs, who are they? Will they make any difference? Should we be watching them? And like what are the, what are the issues that motivate single-issue voting blocs? Thank you.

WASSERMAN: I'd say among the truly persuadable electorate, which is down to maybe 7 or 8 or 9% of voters who are not locked in to a partisan preference either, either way, there are far more feeling thermometer voters than there are single-issue voters. And are there, you know, a few who, you know, vote solely on Israel or on abortion? Sure. But they're pretty much locked into their camps. And the variables I'm watching for those, for those 8% that are still somewhat fluid and up for grabs in these states, I mean, their distinguishing characteristic, they tend to be more purely pocketbook voters than the other 90%. And for the first half of the year, they had a side-by-side comparison of a current president and a former president and their perception of the former president's economy and what things cost was stronger. And now it's, you know, Kamala Harris is kind of winning the the fight over which candidate represents the future and turning the page. And they are suddenly drawn, drawn to that a bit. But when it comes to their perceptions of the economy in the next 80 some odd days, there are two variables I'm watching. One is, the reason voters have, those voters have have been so down on, on the Biden Harris is handling of inflation, even as we've seen inflation numbers come down, is interest rates and their struggle to obtain a home loan or a car loan. And do we see a Fed rate cut before the election? And then the second that hasn't registered in the debate as much or the national conversation is health care costs. And even though, Harris and Biden have been performing below where they did among 18- to 29-year-olds four years ago, the polls have still been close because they've been performing a bit better among seniors. And what I'll be watching is, does the Trump campaign try and leverage the the rate cut to Medicare Advantage that's slated to go into effect in October to try and attack Democrats on health care costs? Or is the Harris campaign more effective at pointing to the Trump campaign's pledge to let Obamacare subsidies expire at the end of 2025? .

BUSETTE: Thank you. This gentleman here, this young lady here, young lady over there, and then, this gentleman and that gentleman, I think we'll we'll wrap with that.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Thank you for being here. [Inaudible] University of New Mexico. I'm visiting. I think I worry and you can give me. You said, for example, that maybe she needs to get out there and get into very detailed policy presentations. I worry that's always been the Democratic trap. We get these very smart

candidates who go into this very, very detailed stuff in the end, like what we saw in 2016 and even with, Barack Obama's campaign, I thought maybe the idea that people need to fall in love with you, that's the really, truly that matters. And maybe that's where I think sometimes polls come short because they don't know how to measure falling in love. I would like you to push back on that, if you don't mind.

BUSETTE: Thank you.

WALTER: Yeah. So, you are right that the more detailed that you get -- and this is where Republicans find themselves now distancing from a 900 page document, called Project 2025, which the candidate did not write, to be clear, but many of the people in that candidate's orbit were contributors to it -- so the more detailed it is, you're right, the more trouble you run into. The difference this time, I do think there are a couple of things. First, she doesn't have to speak to the Democratic audience. If she wrote this in, let's say that Biden had announced he wasn't running for reelection in 2023. We have a big primary. Everybody puts out their policy papers and their white papers and all of this, and it's it's tailored for the primary audience, not necessarily for the general audience or it's a little, you know, it's so balanced that, as they've pointed out, you can't really figure out where they stand up. Now, this is talking to a general election electorate without having to win over those primary voters. And I think that the real question going forward, if you are a voter and this is what the campaigns, do, this is their job figuring out, well, who are those people who voted for Biden in 2020 but are not sold on Kamala Harris, what is it that she's not providing to them? Is it that they just don't know her well enough, so they need to see her more? Is it that they think she's more liberal than Biden ever was? And so she's got to convince them that she's willing to buck up against the more liberal forces in the party? Is it that the economy and Dave's point about the side-by-side is really what's motivating them? That and you hear this in focus groups all the time. Stuff didn't cost this much when Trump was in office. So how is she going to tell people I'm going to help you bring costs down? Trump isn't offering very many specifics either, right? And Project 2025, as he points out, is not his plan. So that you can't he, he does a very good job of staying away from the specifics. I think the real question, the way that I would frame it, is more, what, what is she doing in a debate in other places to show who she is and how she will govern. Right now she's getting the benefit of the doubt because she is really a fresh face. She's turning the page, but people don't know exactly what's on the other side of that page. And so you've got to tell them what that is.

BUSETTE: Great. So, I what we're going to do, for mic runners, this we're going to take two questions at a time just given where we are on the clock. So this young lady over here, that young lady back there, and then these two gentlemen on this row.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Hi. Which of two issues will prove to be the largest determinant of how people voted in 2024? Abortion or the border?

BUSETTE: And we're going to go back there, grab that question, and then we're going to have our panelists weigh in.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Hi. So you were mentioning earlier about, given the nature of just Trump being on the ballot has made it more difficult to determine the accuracy of polling. So I'm curious, not just in this election cycle, but while he's been in kind of the top of the ballot or in the political sphere, what changes have you seen in the way that polling is conducted, or what changes have you made in the way that you're reaching out to people?

BUSETTE: Okay. Thank you.

WALTER: Great. So, that's an excellent question. The abortion, or excuse me or immigration. And, is it fair to say it depends? So, look, abortion was a major factor in 2022, in large part because, many Republican candidates had taken positions that were outside of the mainstream. Now, some of them did that when they were in office, right? They were in office pre-Dobbs and they had signed on to legislation. Some of them were running in primaries, again, pre-Dobbs and moving very far to the right. And so what Democrats were able to do is make the case with the words of their opponent that these folks were too far out on the extreme on the issue of abortion. And we saw that in exit polling, too. You know, when they ask the question, who do you think was the more extreme candidate? Republicans were seen as more extreme than Democrats. That was a big benefit to vote to Democrats. And so voters were upset about the economy. So this was maybe not so much immigration, economy. They were not happy about the economy. They didn't think Biden was doing a good job, but they thought the Republican candidate for Senate was too extreme. And usually, I would assume when they said extreme, they meant on abortion for the most part that, so in that case, the abortion issue was more salient. For immigration, I do think for Republican voters, it is a core issue. And the question in my mind is which conversation is more front and center as we go into the fall? As I said, are we

having more of a border surge? Is there going to be, you know, what what we saw, back in the last year where there was all the controversy about people flying folks to other states and all of that. Is that what we're talking about? Are we talking about, what is happening in the states that do have a ban and the impact it's had on women? Is that getting traction, so, for those, those folks there in the middle? It is clear that I think because Harris is in the race now, the abortion issue I do think gets, does bump up in terms of the saliency, in part because they see her as a more effective advocate in a way that they didn't necessarily see Biden.

WASSERMAN: Yeah. Just briefly, I, I do think this election will be decided by people who probably come closer to Democrats' views on abortion and come closer, in Trump's view, on immigration, at least so far. Even though voters overwhelmingly disapprove of overturning Roe, they haven't seen Trump himself as extreme on the issue. We'll see if that changes now that Democrats have a more forceful communicator atop their ticket. But on the polling trends, I think the largest trend we're seeing is an explosion in large online panel surveys because it's cheaper to conduct. And we're still, trying to, as a polling and political analysis community, trying to improve the science of how we peg those samples to who's voted in the past, who's likely to vote this time around. And, in the remaining telephone polls, text to web seems to work to get more of Trump's types of voters to answer a survey.

BUSETTE: Thank you. And so these two gentlemen and then we're going to wrap up.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Thank you. [Inaudible] Polish Institute for International Affairs Bureau. Washington, DC bureau. Well, first of all, it's a pleasure to hear the best, two of the best in, in the town. Two quick questions for Amy. You said very interesting about this, independent voters, low engaged, engaged voters. So how many of them? Is it 8%, 10%. And, especially where are they located in battleground states? And the second question for Dave. You said this 1% is quite shocking. I thought that this response rate would be like 10%. So, what is the average? Is it really 1% or it's closer to 10%?

WASSERMAN: I guess, take a second part first.

BUSETTE: Hang on, we're going to get the votes and then we're going to.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Well. Thank you. Leon Peace and I have a question about the battleground states, particularly one of them, Pennsylvania. Traditionally, the polling for Pennsylvania has been somewhat

inaccurate, in general. And then specifically with respect to Philadelphia. So my question is, what modifications do you think might have been made since the last polls to be more accurate with respect to, Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, North Philadelphia in particular, in terms of and, getting an accurate report. And does artificial intelligence play any role in any of that?

BUSETTE: Great. Thank you very much. So, we have about a minute. And so we're going to first tackle the question of low-engagement voters. Where are there, where are they and how many of them are they, are there from a percentage perspective?

WASSERMAN: Yeah, they're, they're pretty evenly distributed across the battlegrounds. Yes. We did see a spike in polling response rates during COVID. But I think we're back down to where we have been and been typically in recent years, around 1%. And that makes it really hard when you're trying to get a statewide sample in a place like Pennsylvania. Because if you're pegging it to what happened in the last election, there are perils to that. You don't know where turnout will be up or turnout will be down. One of the surprises in 2020, Joe Biden won Pennsylvania, even though turnout was up pretty much everywhere outside of Philly. But turnout in the city itself was flat.

WALTER: Yeah.

WASSERMAN: And do we see that that that same trend in 2024?

WALTER: Right.

BUSETTE: Anything to add?

WALTER: No, because that was very well done in one minute I will also note.

BUSETTE: Excellent. So I want to thank the audience and I want you to help me thank Amy and David for joining us here today.