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NEW SURVEY TRACKS DARKENING MOOD AND SHIFTING POLITICAL LOYALTIES AHEAD OF MIDTERM ELECTIONS
FINDINGS FROM THE 17TH ANNUAL AMERICAN VALUES SURVEY

Tuesday, October 20, 2026

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OPENING REMARKS

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PRESENTATION

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DIONNE: Welcome to Brookings everyone. My name is E.J. Dionne, I'm a senior fellow here. Welcome to our C-SPAN audience. Welcome to our online audience. We're gonna invite you to ask some questions. Bill is gonna explain when he comes up, my colleague Bill Galston, how you can do that.

This is one of my favorite days of the year. Those of you who know Washington know that it can be a city of fleeting and sometimes opportunistic alliances. And our partnership, Brookings and PRRI, Bill and I, and the whole PRRI staff, this is the 17th version of the American Values study here at Brookings. And I wanna thank PRRI and Bill for this partnership.

I'm not a huge meetings fan, but I love the meetings that go into preparing this questionnaire. We really try to kick around what kind of questions are relevant, what kind of questions are fair, when do questions look biased, and when don't they? Sometimes in a survey you wanna play off biased questions to see where opinion really stands, but that's the only time we do that sort of thing. It's a real blessing.

And you are in for a great treat today because I have always thought that Robbie Jones deserves a Pulitzer and an Emmy for his PowerPoint presentations. They don't have a category yet, but we're gonna create one for you, Robbie. Because very few people I know although our friend Whit Ayres, who's gonna be on one of the panel, I've seen him do it really well too. But very few people I know really have mastered the gift of using PowerPoints to explain surveys better than Robbie. The, this survey is entitled, speaks of a darkening mood in the country, and as you'll see, it's quite remarkable what a bad mood the country is in right now.

And to, before to introduce Robbie I want to introduce a dear partner and colleague, Melissa Deckman. Melissa is the CEO of PRRI. She is the author of the very timely book The Politics of Gen Z: How the Youngest Voters Will Shape Our Democracy. And I can actually testify that I really like this book because I gave a copy to our Gen Z daughter. And she is also you can see her on PRRI's Substack, where she writes regularly about religion, gender, and politics. So Melissa, come on up Yep. Let's hear it for Melissa.

DECKMAN: Good morning, everyone. It is a pleasure to welcome you on behalf of PRI to the release of our 17th annual American Values Survey, which really allows the American public, thought leaders, journalists, and policymakers to gain a deeper understanding of the cultural and religious values underpinning American attitudes about vital public policy concerns, the direction of the country, American identity, and the health of our democracy.

And I think also in this context with the midterm elections, hopefully giving us some insight into what's gonna be shaping how voters are making their choices this year. I think at such a challenging time in our nation's history, examining these issues through a religious, cultural lens is more necessary than ever.

We are, of course, grateful to provide that lens of analysis with our longtime partners in crime, E.J. Dionne and Bill Galston, and really what is PRI's longest relationship. I wanted to acknowledge a few people today the wonderful staff at Brookings for putting this event together so seamlessly, especially Maryam al-Hassani and Tara Moulson.

I also wanted to thank our very dedicated staff at Brookings for putting together this wonderful report, especially Dr. Diana Orszagh, our research director, Colleen Ross, our communications director, Maddie Snodgrass, Avery Park, and Daniel Hoagland. I want to thank our wonderful panel for coming today and sharing their insights into the findings, including Laura Barrón-López, who is MSNOW's White House correspondent, Whit Ayres, who is founder and president of North Star Opinion Research, and David Barker, who is professor of government at American University, and also a non-residential senior fellow here at Brookings.

I'd also like to acknowledge the generous support of the Andrew Carnegie Foundation, who really make this survey possible every year. And additionally, I'd like to thank the Unitarian Universalist Beach Program at Shelter Rock, the Ford Foundation, and the Glenn Family Foundation for additional support.

For those of you joining us at home, you can read the full report at prri.org. Follow us on all the socials, Blue Sky, LinkedIn, Instagram, Facebook, and Threads. I'd also like you to s- invite you to subscribe to PRRI Substack, where you can read The Morning Buzz and other newsletters. And obviously, if you think our work is valuable please share the survey out with folks you know, and if you feel so moved, even consider supporting our work.

It is now my pleasure to introduce Dr. Robert P. Jones to the stage, the president and founder of PRRI and a New York Times bestseller. Robbie's latest book is Backslide: Reclaiming a Faith and a Nation After the Christian Turn Against Democracy, newly released last month. He is also the author of The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy and the Path to a Shared American Future, White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity, which won a 2021 American Book Award, and The End of White Christian America, which won the prestigious 2019 Grawemeyer Award in religion.

Robbie writes the popular Redeeming Democracy newsletter, featuring research and analysis on racial justice, religion, and the moral work of democracy. He holds a PhD in religion from Emory University, an MDiv from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, and a BS in computing science and mathematics from Mississippi Co- College.

So without further ado, I'd like to welcome Robbie to the stage.

JONES: All right. Well, welcome everyone. Welcome back. I see a lot of familiar faces already, and many of you have been on this journey with us over the last 17 years. I can always keep up with it because the survey is one year older than my son. All right? So I'm I kind of know right where we are.

So you've seen the hefty report. I'm sure you've all read it between the time you picked it up and now but I'm gonna hit the highlights. As I move a little quickly. I will try to be clear, but I'm going to move quickly through it so we can get to our discussion. And I'm really just gonna hit the highlights. There's so much here. This report spans 70 pages, all kinds of charts and graphs and and insights. So there'll be a lot more to look at as you go. And again, the report is at prri.org online.

Okay. So darkening mood. I'm gonna start with that and where we are. This is gonna maybe come as a surprise to no one here. But, oh, just so you know so this is a fairly large survey. It's over 5,500 respondents from a random probability sample. Here our margin of error for

the full sample, 1.6 percentage points, plus or minus. This longstanding partnership with the Brookings Institution, and Melissa has mentioned the Andrew Carnegie Foundation, the Ford Foundation, Wilburn Hilder Glenn Family Foundation, and the Unitarian Universalist Beach Program at Shelter Rock who made this possible. So thank you for that.

All right, so where are we here? This, I'm gonna open with the darkening mood thing. This is the percent of people in these groups who say the country is headed in the wrong direction, right? So on the bottom, the economy it is 76% of the country that says the economy's heading in the wrong direction. The way the US is dealing with other countries, 70% wrong direction. The way the federal government is dealing with undocumented immigrants, 62% wrong direction, right? So, here, this will not also surprise you.

Here are Democrats on all three of those issues, right? A nearly unanimous word across the board. Independents are actually not far behind, independents on, on these measures. I think this is really notable. Eight in 10 independents, for example, saying the economy is heading in the wrong direction. Here are Republicans, much less, but I will point this out. On the economy and the way the US is dealing with other countries, if we go back two years ago, we had the same question on here. The number of Republicans saying the country's heading in the wrong direction has in fact doubled. Right? So that's notable, I think here, that is that there's this movement, particularly 52% of Republicans saying the economy's heading in the wrong direction, really notable.

So what issues are driving the country as we're heading into the midterm elections? We had a battery of 10 critical issues on the survey. I'm only got here the ones that they, either Democrats, Republicans, or independents said - where a majority said they were critical. So I haven't put anything that didn't reach that majority point. Here are Democrats. Gonna put them up first As you can see -- cost of housing expenses, electing leaders of good moral character, opposing President Trump's agenda, all very tightly aligned. Healthcare, two-thirds there on, on all these issues. The war in Iran also fairly high on the agenda.

I'm gonna drop independents here next. You can see they're also very strong on the top two electing leaders of good moral character, cost of housing. The other one that really drops up another economic issue here is healthcare a little bit lower on the other issues.

Here are Republicans. Here there are only three things that show up in majority territory. Agreeing cost of housing and everyday expenses. Interestingly enough, electing leaders of good moral character. And down at the bottom, immigration. Now on immigration, they this is a critical issue and are largely still supportive of the president's immigration agenda. So this is kind of a positive. On the electing leaders of good moral character, it turns out when you look at it and look at support for Trump there's very little difference between those who have favorable views of Trump and those who have unfavorable views of Trump on this. So it actually doesn't impact their view of Trump on, on this particular measure.

All right, so we also have some measures here about economic populism and this conversation that is going on around whether socialism, right, in the United States. And so, first of all, just on economic populism, and we have a whole battery of measures in the survey, so I'm just gonna give you a couple here to kind of simplify it. One is just a straightforward evaluation. Nearly impossible today for working families to make ends meet. The second one is more about, like, is the system rigged? Is the, the economy is rigged against working Americans to benefit the rich and the powerful. You can see at the general population level, seven in 10, no difference, like, agree on both of these accounts.

Gonna kind of run through here and on this one I'm gonna look at kind of, racial and ethnic differences. Again, African Americans, eight in 10 on both counts. Latinos again, about three quarters on both counts. Multiracial Americans, it's a little bit lower on the rigged side, but still seven in 10 support AAPI, very similar findings. And you can see it drops a little bit for white Americans. Interestingly enough, even if we look underneath white Americans at non-college and college-educated white Americans, the differences are actually not that big, and that's a little bit unusual that you would, you would expect to see much different, much bigger differences. We don't actually see that many- no, no large differences there.

All right. So socialism, right? This has been something new. Again, there's always... One, one great thing about this survey is that as the country moves, there's always questions you didn't really think you'd need to ask at some previous point and this is one of them here. So we decided to kind of, try to see if people were talking past each other, is like one way to think about this. What do people mean when they use the word socialism? Like, what's in their head when they're throwing that around? So we had two different definitions here and we, which one do you agree with?

Socialism is best understood as a system in which the government-- statement one-- provides benefits such as health insurance, retirement support, and access to free higher education. Or, statement two: controls major parts of the economy such as utilities, transportation, communications, and banks. And as you can see here there's quite a bit of difference between what Democrats or Republicans seem to mean when they use the word socialism.

So Democrats overwhelmingly pick the first one. It's the government providing benefits to Americans. Republicans, on the other hand, if I put the other side of it up here, you can see two-thirds think the other thing. It's the Republican, - it's the government controlling parts of the economy. So part of what's going on is really just this very different perceptions of socialism when that word is thrown around without defining it. So that's really important to keep in mind.

Here's the same question broken down by religion. And basically what you see, is that the religious coalitions that vote tend to lean Democrat line up with Democrats, and the religious coalition that tends to lean Republican line up slightly the other way. White evangelicals really here staking out the other side, all very strongly saying they think it's the second thing, controlling parts of the economy.

Now we also asked, that's a kind of an underlying conceptual question. We also ask a question about whether people saw different movements to be a serious threat to the country. And we asked about the Democratic Socialists of America, and we asked about the MAGA movement in, in this question, among some other things. But this-- these two I wanted to kind of put up side by side. It turns out that as a whole, Americans almost half of Americans say the MAGA, the Make America Great Again movement, poses a serious threat to the country. Thirty-six percent say the same of the Democratic Socialists of America. This will not be surprising that this is what Republicans look like. But this is what independents look like on, on this question. Slim majority saying the MAGA movement, about a third looked like the there. And here's what Democrats look like on this measure. So again, you can see, here, this kind of partisan split, right, on, on which of these movements are a threat to the country.

All right. So, -- yeah, you like the caption? Yeah, pretend I'm on the ballot, right? This has been Trump's closing argument down the midterm elections, to like say, just clo- I mean, I think he's literally said, "Just close your eyes and imagine that I'm on the ballot," right, when you're gonna-- when you cast your ballot. So, we thought, "Well, how's that gonna go?" If that's in fact what people are doing.

We had a question here, I want to be clear about this. E.J. mentioned that sometimes we ask questions that we know have a lean to them, and we do that on purpose. When we do that, we tend to pair them with another question on the other side, right? So we basically say, "We're gonna read you two questions. Tell us which of these that you agree with." That's what we did in this question. I've only got one side of the question up here to make the patterns clear. But we asked people "Do you think that Trump is a potentially dangerous dictator whose power should be limited before he destroys American democracy?" That's clearly a leaning question, right? Or or on the other side, "Do you think he's a strong leader who should be given the power he needs to make America great again?" Like, so that was the statement on the other side.

And whenever we give paired statements, it's also important, we actually rotate them randomly. So, we never let-- so one respondent might get one first, the other respondent's gonna get another one first to balance out whatever trailing effects it might be by getting one question in front of the other one. Here's so we asked this question in 2025, and we've actually seen an uptick here among all Americans. A year ago it was fifty-two percent. Today it is fifty-eight percent in the general population. And here are the partisan breaks on that. You'll see independents in particular have gone up from fifty-six to sixty-four percent on this question. Democrats were already pretty much at the ceiling. They've ticked up a tiny bit, but they're up around ninety percent. And one in five Republicans actually side with this question versus the other, the, the other question. But here you can see this, that independents are kind of up above the the mean and a little closer to Democrats than they are to Republicans on this question.

One thing I will point out here that I don't have a slide on, but a pattern to kind of watch out for I'm gonna flag in a minute. One interesting group in this election is Latino Protestants in the country. This is a group that has historically voted for Trump, about six in ten every time he's been on the ballot. Latino Catholics tend to vote about seven in ten Democrat, but Latino Protestants tend to vote Republican. Latino Protestants on this question are now sixty-two percent saying that they are more likely to agree with the statement that Trump is a potentially dangerous dictator. So that's notable for a group that voted six in ten for him in 2024.

Here is favorability, and I'm just gonna show you the delta here, the difference in favorability between 2024 and 2026 across the kind of seven-point spread of partisanship. You can see that among the strong Republicans, not a lot of drop, but it-- among the leaners, it's about a ten-point drop in Trump favorability, even among the leaners. Here independents, twenty-point drop in Trump favorability over the last two years. Not a lot of movement among Democrats 'cause they were already overwhelmingly-- they were already in single digits favorability for Trump. But that independent number, again, in the middle is quite something: twenty, twenty points across the way.

Here's the same question, same analysis, but with the religious groups. Notably white evangelical Protestants, his strongest defender, voted eight in ten for him every time he's been on the ballot are now at sixty-two percent favorability. So even after a ten-point drop,

they're still at sixty-two. So I should point that out, right? They're still overwhelmingly with the president here by a margin of more than two to one. But you'll see white non-evangelical Protestants dropped nearly ten points. White Catholics, not that much. But here's that group- there's Latino Protestants on this question, right? 20 points over the last two years.

All right, so we're here, we're all thinking about the midterms. We're just about a dozen days out from the midterms. Do excitement first. So among those who are registered to vote and that we're looking here and say they're going to vote, so these are likely voters. We do see the Democrats have an excitement edge, right? So we ask how excited are you to be voting in the upcoming midterm elections. Here you can see independents a little less. That's pretty typical. But looks like Democrats have a slight excitement edge, particularly among the very excited.

It's 46/31 among the very excited people on among Democrats here. And here is actually our election kind of ballot. Are you likely to vote for the Democratic candidate in your district or the Republican candidate in your district? And we're showing basically a seven-point spread between Democrats, with Democrats holding a, an advantage. We did check this with a more recent poll just to make sure. It basically hasn't moved that much since we were in, since we were in the field. Here's Republicans, though. 83% saying they're gonna vote for the Republican candidate. And I'll go and put them all three up here. On the flip side, 89% of Democrats saying they're gonna vote for the Democratic candidate. But the independents here you'll see about a 15 point advantage here between Democrats over Republicans. So this bodes well, I think, for Democrats in the midterms election.

Now we've heard a lot about election integrity and worries about if the election's going to be free and fair and all of that. Here's a real, a divide in the country that we... what is the biggest problem we're facing, right, in terms of, like, election integrity? There are two very different ideas in the country today. The country's basically divided between these two things. Do you think the biggest problem is, statement one, people casting votes who are not eligible to vote? In other words, voter fraud. Or statement two, eligible voters being denied the right to vote, right? And the country's basically split here but you will see this massive partisan divide on this question.

We have Republicans overwhelmingly here. The, it's 70, 80, eight in 10 saying that it is people casting votes who are not eligible to vote. Independents a little more divided, but leaning toward the eligible voters being denied the right to vote. And then Democrats overwhelmingly on the other side, right? So we've got a partisan big divide about even what the biggest problem we're facing is in the upcoming election. Here it is just divided by race. The main thing I want to point out here is how different African Americans look here. It's only 25% saying that the biggest problem is people casting votes not eligible to vote. Overwhelmingly saying it's eligible voters being denied the right to vote that is the biggest problem.

So here is a question that I think we should pay some attention to. If it's, ... and we had two questions here that basically were if serious voter fraud is suspected, the president should -- and these are two separate questions, but I've got them here on the same chart-- order federal agents to seize the ballots and take over the vote counting or postpone the 2026 midterm elections for Congress.

So we see what people say. Here's the one I ... 58% of Republicans say that they would be supportive of the president ordering federal agents to seize the ballots and take over the

vote counting if serious voter fraud was suspected in the midterm elections. But only 34% would support postponing the the the midterm elections. Independents, not much support there at all. And Democrats, as you can see, less than one in five on, on either one of these questions. But that 58% number I think is one we should pay attention to.

Now, in every election, there's always this language about the God gap historically between Democrats and Republicans. It tends to go, the more you attend church, the more likely you are to vote Republican. I have been doing battle with this interpretation for a dozen years at least. I'm going to continue that battle by just sort of, like, pointing this out that, yes, there is some truth to that statement, but it mostly pertains to white Christians, right? That is where the God gap exists. It is true among white Christians that the more you go to church, the more likely you are to vote Republican. That's largely because it's also the more likely you are to be evangelical if you go to church more often. So you can see it up here in the top one, if you just look at the top. Yes, absolutely. Those who attend weekly or more, only 19% likely to vote for the Democratic candidate. Attend seldom or never, though it's about half among white Americans.

Let's go and put the other side up. So that's clearly there. Among Latino voters, though, even if you look at the attend weekly or more they're just basically divided with a slight lean toward Republicans. But so the pattern is there, but it's not nearly as high. And it doesn't really get you even into majority Republican territory, even among the attend weekly. But note African American voters. Like, it is absolutely flat, right? There's no God gap among African Americans. Attendance makes very little difference in how they vote here.

What I think is maybe more important for this election is what we've dubbed the empathy gap here. So many of you may have seen there is there's a number of books out now attacking empathy as a sin, as suicidal, as toxic. And these are-- I see some heads, like people looking around like, what? Yeah, so this is actually happening in particularly in evangelical circles. So we decided to ask a question about this. And again, we did this kind of paired statement thing. So which of these do you agree with? Empathy is a foundational moral value that helps build a healthy society, or empathy can become dangerous when it leads people away from building a society ground, guided by God's truth. And we took that language out of this debate that's been happening here. And you can actually see there's kind of a partisan divide on this question.

So, so these are people who agree with the first statement, that empathy is a foundational moral value that helps build a healthy society. Republicans are still in majority territory agreeing with that, but it's low majority, 54%, and you can see that it's actually not just about partisanship, it's actually about a connection to Trump and the MAGA movement, right? That among, even among Republicans who have a favorable view of Trump they're much less likely to agree with that statement than Republicans who have unfavorable views of Trump, which look basically like independents on, on this question. So here's the other side of it, right? You can see on, on among Republicans it is 38% now nearly 4 in 10 who picked the second statement. But that's not really where it... I mean, among Republicans is, you can see the traction.

Where it's really gained traction is among white evangelical Protestants, 'cause this is where that debate has really been gone. And now we find actually that today it is a majority it's 54% of white evangelicals who affirm that second statement, right? That empathy has become, can become dangerous when it leads people away from building a society guided by God's truth. They're the only religious group in the country that is true for. Every other religious

group is basically about two-thirds the other direction picking the empathy as a foundational moral value.

But notably that, that shift or this movement, so that white evangelicals now are suspicious of the idea of empathy, I think is really notable. And we'll, I'm quite sure we'll hear more about that. It's also driven quite strongly by views on Christian nationalism. Right, it's, in fact it's fairly linear here that you, kind of stair-steppy, that, you know, Christian nationalism adherence, those who believe that Christians should exercise dominion over the US, that US law should be based on the Bible, et cetera are much more likely to say that empathy is, can become dangerous when it leads people away from building a society guided by God's truth. And you can see that the further you go out, the more you reject that worldview, the more you are likely to embrace empathy as a foundational moral value.

All right, next to last section here and I'll wrap up. One of the questions we've been asking really all the way back from the beginning is this question about what to do about immigrants who are living in the country illegally. Right, this is obviously at the forefront of our politics today. We've been asking this question all along. Our question, has always given them three, three options. We should provide them a path to citizenship provided they meet certain requirements. We should not allow them to become citizens, but give them some kind of legal status, or three, we should identify and deport them.

And so we give all three of those options. This is the side of the first, of picking the first one. There should be a pathway to citizenship here. And as you can see, both among all Americans and independents, despite the way that this has been used as a political football particularly over the last decade, it's remained fairly constant. But here's what's happened to party, in the partisanship side. At its tightest in 2014, there was only a 14-point gap between Republicans and Democrats on this question of a path to citizenship, and it was about half of Republicans that, that said, "Yeah, that, that seems to be the right the right way forward." That 14-point gap has become a 42-point gap among partisans. In our most recent survey, you can just see this, this yawning gap opening, opening up here. And part of, part of what's driving that is I'm gonna do the same question just on white evangelical Protestants and show you all three options.

The first one is allowed a way to become citizens. You can see the drop, right? Back when we were first asking this, it was a majority of white evangelicals who said, "Yes, we should allow them a path to citizenship here." Here is the the second option, the kind of permanent legal residence that's never been a, a favorite option. On this last one, though, identify and deport them, is where you can really see the difference, and I've put a trend line on here just so you can see it. But now that has become the preferred option among white evangelical Protestants, the to identify and deport them. It's gone from 30% to 47% here. So that has really been the sea change in Republican and white evangelical politics on this thing.

One other question here that we've been tracking about whether the federal government should detain immigrants who are in the country illegally in internment camps until they should, until they can be deported. It's about a third of the country that agrees with that policy. But it is 6 in 10 Republicans, twice as many Republicans who agree with that policy. It's 28% of Democrats, and it's only ... oh, sorry, 28% of independents, 16% of Democrats, and this is one of those kind of asymmetric polarization things where independents much closer to Democrats, and Republicans really in a very different place on this particular question.

Oh, I wonder what happened to my labels here. That's odd. Okay, well, I'll tell you what these are. I just rehearsed this. So we had a question where we asked about whether what kind of a country we wanted to be in terms of foreign policy. And the two statements were, "I would prefer the US to be known as," and the blue here is this statement, "A reliable neighbor that only uses military force as a last resort." The green statement is, "A mighty nation that does not hesitate to use military force to defend its interests." Right? And so you can see the patterns here. This is Democrat, Independent, Republican. Democrats overwhelmingly, more than 8 in 10, saying they'd like the US to be a reliable neighbor that only uses military force as a last resort. And this is 6 in 10 down here on the bottom of Republicans saying, "Nope, we prefer it to be a mighty nation that does not hesitate to use military force to defend its interests."

All right, finally I try to let, I, as I always try to find some little consensus or agreement to find our way here given amid all the polarization. So here it is. There is really strong agreement about reform for what elected officials and for anti-corruption measures here with elected officials. So the three things, using public office to oh, so these are things that should be illegal, like not legal. Using public office to financially benefit themselves or members of their family; drawing maps, voting maps to give their own political party an advantage, so gerrymandering; buying or selling individual stocks while in office. And there's one slide on here that does not have a big partisan divide, right, on there. And so it is overwhelmingly Democrats, Republicans, Independents all saying yeah, all of this should be illegal." And and kind of joining hands across the divides here on that. So I'm going to leave it right there, and we will jump into the next phase of the program.

So thank you.

GALSTON: Good morning, everyone, and welcome to phase two of this whiz bang hour and a half. I'm Bill Galston, a senior fellow here in Governance Studies here at Brookings. I'll be serving as the moderator for today's discussion. And Melissa has already been kind enough to introduce the panelists, but just so you can attach faces to names, I'll run through it briefly.

You've already met Robert Jones, no additional introduction needed. Following him Laura Barrón-López, who's the White House reporter for MS Now, and has been a little bit in the news herself lately. Whit Ayres, who's the president of North Star Opinion Research. And stage right, David Barker, who's a professor in AU's Department of Government and a nonresident senior fellow at Brookings.

And here's how we'll spend the next hour together. Three roughly equal blocks. First, I will ask each of the panelists, starting with Laura, to offer brief, that is to say five-minute opening statements on what they found most interesting, surprising, and/or significant about this year's American Values Survey. Then I'll throw a handful of questions to all of the panelists, and in the final fifteen or twenty minutes, we'll turn it over to you. By you, I mean both people who are filling this room and the many hundreds who are participating in this event online. So without further ado, Laura, would you offer your opening statement, please?

BARRÓN-LÓPEZ: Okay. Try not to feel singled out that I'm the only woman on the panel and I'm starting it off. But I guess I looked at this... I picked out two to three things that I thought also matched the way the president, since I cover President Trump, that the way he was essentially making his final pitch to voters leading into the midterms, or to election day.

He's now out on the campaign trail a lot, as many of visiting a lot of red states, states that people didn't expect to be on the map. And he's not necessarily making any argument about the economy. He's not making any argument about the Iran war. And he's not talking about regulating AI or data centers, which is something also that's become a bigger issue in these midterms, I think more than people expected.

So he's not really addressing many of the things that the voters... that we've been hearing from voters, including Republicans. But things that stood out to me in the survey, one had to do around the theme, one of the president's final messages, which is that the election was rigged in 2020, and it continues to potentially be rigged in 2026, which we know is not true.

And his arguments behind that are that there are widespread non-citizens voting in elections, that there is fraud, and that elections in certain states like California can't be trusted. And so on that front, the stuff that stood out to me was that about six in 10 Republicans agree with the statement. Still, six in 10, 59% agree with the statement that the 2020 election was stolen from President Trump. Now, what's notable is that's down from 62% in 2024, which surprised me a little bit, but maybe it's because despite the president continued to repeat that lie he has not provided any evidence.

And even though he held a speech in July again saying that this was the case, he then, he accused China of interfering in the US 2020 election, but provided no evidence, and then said he wasn't going to actually take any action against China, and continues to speak favorably of Xi Jinping.

Related to this larger theme that an argument that the president is making was that six in 10 Americans, 59% disagree with the statement which you mentioned, Rob, that if there are serious concerns about voter fraud in a local voting location, the president should order federal agents to seize the ballot. It's promising that fifty-nine percent, I guess, disagree with that statement that this action should not be taken, but the fact that there are a majority of Republicans, fifty-eight, that agreed is striking. And I've been talking to a number of election officials across states, including Republican top election officials in states like Utah, who are incredibly worried about essentially the timing of what the president may try to do.

They are prepared, they think, for almost every single scenario that could come their way. They have a lot of litigation already written and ready to go in case the president attempts to deploy federal agents. But they are treating all of these threats as incredibly serious and are prepared for them even though they I think are a little bit skeptical that the president may necessarily deploy one of these actions in the final days leading up to the election.

I think one of the other things that stood out to me was the empathy data and the fact that matches with a lot of the different policies and arguments that the president is also making in the final days before the election. Which is, essentially, when I think about empathy and the fact that there are fewer Republicans who necessarily think that empathy is foundational to the country, I also look at the president normalizing and often glorifying and talking about violence towards fellow Americans, which is something that has continued during his rallies especially recently.

And then lastly, I think the other stuff that stood out to me, which I'm not sure you mentioned, Rob, was the question about great replacement theory. And around one-third of Americans agree with the great replacement theory or the belief that immigrants are invading our

country and replacing our cultural and ethnic background. So that's thirty-five percent, while sixty-one percent disagree. And, broken down, views have held steady since 2019 with Republicans sixty-six percent agreeing with this, with the racist and antisemitic great replacement theory. And one thing that stood out to me in the last month or so is the frequency with which we've heard from Republican officials like DHS Secretary Mullen and like Steven Miller and others, this, these public comments essentially saying, pushing the great replacement theory. Mullen very recently saying that he asked ChatGPT, "How do you change a red state to blue?" And he said the answer that he was given was to change the demographics. Demographics and migration. And Steven Miller has also talked about, quote, "descendants of illegal aliens" as the largest voting bloc in the United States, and has characterized birthright citizenship as calling Americans who have that through birthright citizenship saying that they are taking the inheritance of who he considers real Americans.

So this is part of the final message from the president and his administration which is to continue a playbook that he's deployed. He deployed it in 2018, he deployed it in 2020, he deployed it in 2016. And it seems that potentially similar to the 2018 midterms, this time around it may not work.

So those were the things that stood out to me.

GALSTON: Thanks, Laura. You've gotten us off to a running start. Whit Ayres.

AYRES: Thank you, Bill, and thanks to the invitation to be here with you. It's good to be back at Brookings. Just a quick word about election fraud before I go into my main point. I find it extremely ironic that in 2020 when the Republicans were in charge of the government, the election was rigged and fraudulent. But in 2016 and 2024 when the Democrats were in charge of the government, the election was free and fair. So, just saying.

One of the things I found most, most disturbing about this survey was the increasing partisan divide on path to citizenship and other immigration issues, I suspect. Back in 2014, Marco Rubio and Lindsey Graham were clients of North Star Opinion Research. And they worked as a gang of eight on an immigration reform bill that would have solved a lot of the problems that we're facing today. It had $30 billion in it for border security. It had an earned pass to citizenship, not amnesty, but you pay taxes, you pay a fine, you pay some recompense for having broken the law, but then over its period of years, you could become an American citizen.

As Robert pointed out, that was, had a partisan divide at the time of about 14 points between Democrats and Republicans, but that's ballooned into a 42-point divide. Now, it would never-- The, that bill got 68 votes in the Senate And it would never have gotten 68 votes in the Senate if there had been a 42-point partisan divide. It was a much closer set of values between Democrats and Republicans on immigrants than it is today, and that's really troubling.

Why? Well, because if you look at the number of deportations, Barack Obama still has the record of about a half a million deportations in one year. It looks like Trump may pass that or at least equal that this year. They're certainly trying to do so. But think of this. There're about 14 million illegal immigrants in the country. If every single president in every year got a half a million deported, it would take, what? 28 years to deport all the illegal immigrants in the

country. It's not going to happen. There are going to be millions of illegal immigrants who will remain here, and we have a problem with how we deal with them.

And I wish that piece of legislation had passed. It got 68 votes in the Senate. John Boehner would not put it on the floor of the House because it didn't have a majority of the majority support. A majority of Republicans did not support it. I have a disagreement with some of my Republican friends on this, but I think if he had put it on the floor, it would have passed, and we would have resolved many of the issues that we're facing today.

So Bill, I think that's one of the most disturbing things I, I saw on this report. We have a festering wound that we are going to have to deal with in a rational and reasonable way, and the idea of deporting everybody is simply a non-starter when you're dealing with that question. So I'll leave it at that and go to the next panel.

GALSTON: Well , Whit, I've given that same account almost verbatim myself, and I had a side chat with Mr. Boehner's chief of staff many years later, who acknowledged that if the bill had been put on the floor, it would have passed. Of course, that was the moment at which Eric Cantor was defeated by, what? Dave Brat-- was that his name? Dave Brat. And, and I was told to my face that if that hadn't happened, Boehner would have put it on the floor, but that single electoral outcome terrified him, and he wouldn't do it. David Barker.

BARKER: Thanks a lot. And I have to congratulate Robbie and Melissa and everybody at PRRI, even though I can't really see you, Melissa. Everybody at PRRI for once again putting together a, just a treasure trove of data to analyze for those of us who, try to understand the deep wellsprings of public opinion, especially as they relate to values and religion. It's really remarkable.

And, we heard a few minutes ago, about some of the stuff on here that's relevant and directly pertinent to the election, but I don't wanna focus on that because you can get similar information from a lot of surveys when it comes to that stuff. I really do wanna focus on some of these deeper issues.

And I wanna start with the empathy thing because this is striking in the polarization of the concept of empathy. And I wanna emphasize off the bat that it's another one of these things where I believe that Democrats, Republicans, evangelicals, and others are talking past each other a, a little bit, right? So when the average Democrat, indeed, I would say the average American, hears the term empathy they think of it in broad strokes, right? In terms of, as George Clooney has put it somewhat colorfully, giving a damn about other people. Actually, he put it slightly more colorfully than that but I'll leave it at that.

When we think of empathy, that's kinda like what we think of, a lot of us, right? But when you look at these anti-empathy books that have come out that Robbie referenced by Joe Rigney and Mary Beth Stuckey and some other folks they specifically are talking about this notion of completely inhabiting the perspective of another person to the point that it makes it difficult for you to hold them accountable, right? So if someone is engaging in behavior that's destructive to themselves or destructive to other people if you, like, really just try to, like, see completely where they're coming from, then it's gonna be harder for you to say like, "Well, no, actually, well, we understand and I can sympathize with you, but you're gonna have to change," right?

So that's their argument, which is a lot more reasonable, right? At the same time, I think that particular interpretation and that particular point, which is, perhaps fairly reasonable gets lost, right, in, in the broader conversation. And I think that when the average evangelical Christian hears an anti-empathy message kind of generally, or sees a headline or sees a social media post or something like that and then that filters through the broader Christian community to some degree and the broader Republican community to some degree and the broader culture to some degree, it winds up, perhaps unintentionally, I'm not sure, but it winds up providing a, a permission structure for cruelty, right? And certainly for apathy. Even if that's not what those particular people actually mean for it to do, I think it, it winds up doing that.

And we see that now, right? In some of the stuff that, that we observed in this survey, survey with regard to attitudes towards undocumented immigrants, some of the, the ICE behavior and support for ICE, certainly the, the aid, the foreign aid stuff. And I just wanna note that it's remarkable how far the religious right has come in terms of how much it's changed since the George W. Bush years. Compassionate conservatism, we're a far cry from that. People forget, but it was the evangelical aspect of the Bush administration that was at the front lines of compassionate conservatism. They're the ones who came up with that phrase. They're the ones who... I mean, I don't know if Bush needed pushing because he was in the same camp. But they were the, the ones who were in favor of a path to citizenship for immigrant, for undocumented immigrants. They're the ones who led the PEPFAR program, which was the AIDS relief in Africa, which saved hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of lives. They tripled funding for aid in developing countries. They were in, in favor of, faith, more faith-based initiatives for social welfare programs, right?

The current iteration of the Christian right is significantly different than the mid-2000s iteration of the Christian right, and I think that's worth emphasizing. One aspect of that we'd... we heard about Christian nationalism, but another aspect is this increasing perception of empathy and, what you might broadly think of as, as compassionate public policy as being effeminate Right? One of the things that rings really true in this survey and when you dig into the correlations and the data, you see that an, an incredibly strong correspondence between, again, this negative attitude towards empathy and also believing that the country has become too soft and feminine, right? And it's overwhelmingly, like, concentrated among evangelicals. Okay, that's the first point.

The second point I wanna make is a, a broader distinction and Robbie kind of got at this to some degree, between evangelical Protestants and other types of Protestants. People tend to think of all Protestants as evangelicals, or sometimes tend to think of all Christians as, as evangelicals. But there is a significant Christian Protestant center to center-left in this country, and you see it in the survey that it may in, in some ways even be growing. So mainline Protestants specifically are about as large a, a group in the country as are evangelicals. And while they symbolically tend to identify as Republicans still, this is a holdover from generations past, and they and they call themselves conservatives, when you look through issue after issue what political scientists call operational ideology, they are consistently center-left, and consistently in some... well, in some cases, I should say, quite a bit to the left, right? And so when you combine the, the Christian center-left with the Christian left, which we can say is, like, largely made up of Black Protestants and Hispanic Catholics, that group is actually a bigger group than the Christian right.

And so, you're kind of seeing that maybe in some of these candidacies this this cycle. James Talarico in Texas, Adam Hamilton in Kansas. Overall, there are nine Democrats running for House or Senate offices right now who are either clergy, former clergy, seminarians, et

cetera and six of them probably are gonna win. And so, this, this notion of the Democratic Party as a fundamentally anti-religious party doesn't really comport with reality. And I'll leave it at that.

GALSTON: That's great, David. Thank you. Yeah. Okay. Now we're gonna give the author of this, of this report, or at least one of the co-authors of the report, an opportunity to pick out what he finds most interesting, surprising, or significant. Robbie?

JONES: Well, we had mentioned the empathy thing, and I'm really glad you brought up the great replacement theory because I think these things are really connected, right? Because there's a sense of like, these are bigger questions like, who belongs and who doesn't? Right? It's kind of the biggest thing we're dealing with here that runs through that, and so who's deserving of your empathy is like the underlying question here too, right? So it's not just empathy itself, but who's deserving of your empathy, who's not deserving. The, I think those kind of questions are like really big and really important.

And I'm just gonna say like one little teaser thing here. I worry, like when I hear this kind of attack on empathy, and I should just say it's an orchestrated attack. There are multiple books. This is a very clear and orchestrated effort. When I see that, the worrisome question to me is why? Why would we need a theology that undermines the idea of empathy, right? And I think there are nothing but scary question or scary answers to that to that question. So I'll just leave that one there. We can pick it up a minute.

And then I just wanna extend David's question too about the mainline, right? And the and the evangelicals. And again, what we've seen actually is that even though the white mainline Protestants are so loud and so visible and they do show up to vote, right? At rates higher than most of the rest of the country. So, they are overrepresented at the polls even from their general population because they turn out at very high rates. So they're certainly important. They're a third of the Republican base, so they're huge on the Republican side of politics, but they are still only 13% of the country. 13, one three. White mainline Protestants are 13% of the country, right? And in the Midwest, and this is what, for the midterms, what's really important, if you go down through the Ohio, Iowa Michigan, Pennsylvania.

BARKER: Kansas.

JONES: What's that? Kansas even, right? That if you look at the non-evangelical even white Christians group, they out, actually outnumber the white evangelicals down through the Midwest. Now, that's not true in like Georgia, North Carolina. But if you look at the Midwest where a lot of these kind of toss-up races are running through if I'm a strategist, I'm worried less about the white evangelicals 'cause they, they're probably just gonna turn out and probably gonna vote the way they have always voted. I'm much more worried about the white mainline Protestants, white Catholics that tend to vote more like six in 10 Republican, right? And are much less connected to the president.

BARKER: And in this cycle, in this survey, majority of them say they plan to vote for Democrats.

JONES: Yeah.

GALSTON: Yeah Well, terrific. Thanks to the four panelists for such interesting and diverse observations and for bringing us in on time and under budget. So, I am now going to follow the lead of the last two speakers and steer us farther down the road of some of the deeper issues raised by this survey, which is, after all, the American Values Survey.

It casts a lot of light on contemporary politics but also contemporary culture and society and beliefs. So here's my first question to the panel: What, in your view, is the significance of widening partisan gaps on gender issues? Couple of, a couple of takeaways from the survey. Over the past 15 years, the gap between Democrats and Republicans on the proposition that, quote, "Our society has become too soft and feminine," has more than doubled from 23 points to 48 points. And exactly the same thing has happened in response to the prompt that, quote, "Society is better off when men and women stick to the jobs and tasks they are naturally suited for." What's going on?

AYRES: I think Laura should go first.

BARKER: Good one.

JONES: Again.

BARKER: Nah, that was a joke, I think.

BARRÓN-LÓPEZ: No. But I'm happy to, I guess, give my initial thoughts.

To me, the... what's going on here is what Rob was just, Robbie was just talking about, which is there's an orchestrated, concerted attack on empathy and, I guess, a backlash to women becoming more equal and to try to push gender roles back to what they were, even before my lifetime.

So, because, as we're talking about the attacks on empathy, I just keep thinking of what we've seen coming from different Republican figures over the last decade. I mean, 'cause again, the attacks on empathy to me are tied to feeding this belief that people should maintain the traditional gender roles. And by that, I mean, Vice President JD Vance was pushing this different version of Catholic doctrine just a year ago, saying that... I'm gonna mispronounce it even though I was raised Catholic.

The Odor-

JONES: Amoris ...

BARRÓN-LÓPEZ: Amoris. Yeah. Thank you. Essentially, believing that it's concentric expansion of who you are empathetic with and your interests. Your family first, then only after that, your neighbors, then only after that, your community, then eventually maybe everyone else in the world you can be empathetic with. Pushing that belief onto the public.

Then there's also the Pete Hegseths of the world, who is attempting to make the Pentagon, the military less open, less welcoming to different types of Americans, be it by their ethnicity or be it by their gender and by their sexual orientation. We've seen a number of just

systematic pushing out of women from top ranks, but also LGBTQ people and transgender Americans from positions that they held and were able to carry and execute.

So I just keep thinking about the coordinated attack on it, and that's how we're getting to more Americans believing that there should be a return to traditional norms.

GALSTON: Dan, you want to get in on this?

BARKER: Absolutely. So I don't disagree with any of that. I think there's a lot of legitimacy there. But I think there's some additional stuff going on that, that we can point to. And one, for anybody who hasn't seen it yet or heard about it yet there's a really good book that just came out by Dan Cox who at AEI, who's Robbie's former colleague at PRRI, called Generation Uncoupled and talks about the, the various ways that, that young men and women in particular are widening and separating, not just on, on politics, but in terms of the degree to which they ever even interact with each other, right? The degree to which they, get married, even like, have boyfriends and girlfriends in high school, et cetera, et cetera.

And part of that dynamic has something to do with our increasing reliance on being online for social interaction, right? Especially for those who came of age during COVID. So as all of us spend more and more of our time socializing or whatever scrolling online as opposed to in person, the frequency with which we encounter people of the opposite sex is going down, and down, right? Because I'm sure all of you, have recognized yourselves that when you're in online communities, those online communities tend to be extremely gendered, right? When we are the... My algorithm looks a lot different than Melissa's algorithm, I'm sure, right? And that, I don't know, I guess I could be wrong about that, Melissa. But there's-- yeah, actually, you're probably right-- but but so that's part of it, right? We're just not around each other as much, and young people in particular aren't engaging with each other as much, and that winds up creating these differences between men and women in terms of their attitudes toward each other and a distrust toward each other.

I think another aspect it's not just that women have become more, more equal, it's that over the course of the past decade at least if not longer, young women in particular have come to really out-achieve men, right, on a number of different dynamics. And there's the great book and all this stuff by Richard Reeves and others on this that demonstrates this clearly, right? That in terms of rates of graduation, GPAs, college attendance, college admissions, college graduations, jobs, even incomes right up in, in the 20s. Like, women are just doing much better than, than men are these days, and there are a number of reasons for that.

But that, in, in some ways creates, further backlash or resentment on the part of young men and also just, not all of it is like, that, that sounds bad, like resentment. And I think there is, there's an aspect of it that is like genuinely negative and indignant in that way. But there's another aspect that's understandable, right? That that people just start to feel like, damn, like why are we like falling behind? And and how come nobody seems to care, right? I think there's some legitimacy to, to that argument.

GALSTON: Yeah. I'm gonna switch now to my second question, if that's okay with the panelists.

JONES: Can I make just one quick... I'll be very fast.

GALSTON: Yes.

JONES: Just one way to tie this together, I think, is I do think we should take seriously the last A in MAGA. Right? Right? It's always a reclaim, a go back back to a former time, and I do think the gender attitudes are the same way in that, so who should be leading? It's really white straight men, right? Who should be leading whatever we're talking about, right? And then, so it's not just like that there are different roles, but the roles - and one's here and one's here, it's that one is here and one is here, right? It's a hierarchy, right? So it's a split by race, a split by gender, and there's an implicit hierarchy in that worldview.

And so I think that's part of what we're... The Make America Great Again part, right, is a reaching back to a former time where there was a "proper order" to society, right? And I think that's part of the what holds together the stuff on race, the stuff on immigration, the stuff on Christian nationalism, and the stuff on gender all fits, right, in that kind of a worldview.

GALSTON: So here's question number two, which is sort of at the seam of culture and politics. 20 years ago, if someone had predicted that within a decade the Republican Party would be taken over by nationalist populism, who would have believed it? In the same spirit, I must ask, based on the results of this survey and anything else that you wanna bring to bear on it, does socialism have a future in the United States?

BARRÓN-LÓPEZ: I think Whit should go first.

AYRES: My pleasure. If you ask Americans whether they have a favorable or an unfavorable opinion of capitalism or socialism, capitalism swamps socialism. Like two-thirds of Americans have a positive view of capitalism, only a third of socialism. But the interesting part is what's going on in the Democratic Party.

Because the interest in socialism in the Democratic Party is driven by that basically one-third of the party that consider themselves democratic socialists. If you look at Democrats who are not democratic socialists, capitalism is far more popular than socialism, but it's the, the one-third of the party, a little less, thirty-one percent or so, who are positive about socialism more more than capitalism. And that's an substantial percentage of one of our major political parties.

I think what happens to it is gonna be determined by what happens to candidates like El-Sayed in Michigan. If he wins, he's a very powerful, persuasive personality, and I think the socialism in the Democratic Party will grow. On the other hand, if he blows what is eminently a winnable Senate seat for Democrats, I think that's gonna put kind of a damper on the enthusiasm for socialism in the Democratic Party. But the, the key point is that most Democrats like capitalism a lot better than socialism, but there's a strong minority that's driving this interest in socialism.

GALSTON: Dave?

BARKER: So in, in this survey I think we see again that it depends on what we mean by socialism, right? I think that and I think, what Whit is saying is completely accurate, right, that if we're thinking of socialism as seizing the means of production, right? Which is the way that a majority of Republicans in the sample interpret it as, the, the government like taking control of the economy, that's not very popular, right?

It's not very popular again, even among Democrats. Honestly, I'm not even sure how many DSA types are in favor of that, right? And that, to be fair, that is the traditional definition of socialism, right? However if we interpret socialism more the way the, the typical Democrat interprets it in this survey, which is really a a much heavier welfare state, right? Or what is often referred to as social democracy in other parts of the world, right? Where that involves, much higher taxation and significantly more redistribution for the purpose of trying to expand equality of opportunity for other groups.

That type, that version, that interpretation is growing in popularity quite substantially, even among Republicans, right? We saw that more than four in ten Republicans in this survey said that they would be interested in taxing, soaking the rich and having national health insurance. A lot of them were at the - almost the same number were in favor of some version of a universal basic income, which sounds a lot like socialism, and on down the list.

And so I do think that it's fair to say that Paul Ryan/Mitt Romney/you know, Ronald Reagan, et cetera, as Republican Party is no longer with us, right? The folks down the street at AEI I think don't necessarily represent or recognize the Republican Party anymore. The party is not so much conservative in the way that we have traditionally understood it throughout most of our lifetime. It is populist and moving even further in that direction, including on economics.

AYRES: To Dave's point, among Trump voters, frequently the number two choice was Bernie Sanders.

BARKER: And back in 2016.

GALSTON: The horseshoe theory of American politics.

BARRÓN-LÓPEZ: Also, the perception is so interesting, too, because El-Sayed does not call himself a socialist. He says that he's not a socialist. He says that he's a capitalist calls himself a progressive. So I think just as, it's kind of representative of what we're talking about and how different... how people view the different perceptions of what socialism could or couldn't be and which parties are promoting one version of it over the other.

GALSTON: Yeah. If I may break the moderator's fourth wall for just a minute. If you look at the national program of the DSA, you will see a harder edged form of socialism, including the nationalization of a number of aspects of the economy. And so, as is the case with many movements, there's a hard core and a softer periphery. And, but the adherence of the hard core, because of the clarity of what they want can frequently achieve outsized results.

It is worth remembering that it wasn't until very late in the game that Donald Trump in 2016 started getting anything like majority support in Republican primaries. I mean, he, he won early with around thirty-five percent. And so if you have a determined minority in one lane and a majority of a political party split among six, seven, eight, ten different candidates, we've seen very recently what can happen. And it's going to be, especially if El-Sayed does win, I think that is likely to trigger a presidential candidacy by a representative, of democratic socialism. Where exactly on the spectrum, I don't know.

AYRES: Bill, the difference in that is that in 2016 most of the Republican primaries were winner take all. I know because my guy was Rubio who came in second in a lot of those

primaries and got zero delegates. But the Democratic Party is proportional representation, which makes it harder for that one-third person to dominate.

GALSTON: Yeah. So here's my final question, before we turn to the audience.

One of the findings from this survey that struck me most forcefully was the fact that young adults ages eighteen to twenty-nine are significantly less trusting of others across a number of different differences. Whether you're talking about differences of partisanship or differences of religion differences of national origin.

I mean, you could have knocked me over with a feather when I saw that young adults are significantly less trusting of people who come from other countries than older Americans. What? So what are we to make of this?

BARKER: I feel like I'm talking too much but I will go ahead and start again. So I think part of it has to do with what I was referencing earlier 'cause again, what in the data is a strong correlation between youth, social isolation, online behavior, and then distrust. And so, none of these things are causal, but you can see a natural causal chain there that, that may in fact be true, right? That the less time you spend with other people, especially other people who are remotely different than you and the more time you spend online, then the less trusting you're going to be in general, not just of other people, but also of institutions and in growing more cynical and whatever, which is what we see.

The young people, by the way, are also the group of Democrats who are most likely to say that the violence might be necessary, right, if the wrong side wins and stuff like that. They're also the ones who tend to support a little bit more anti-democratic types of sentiments, right? And so I think all these things fit together.

Another piece of it, I think that is relevant to note might be that young people all... Well, two other things. Number one, young people also grew up during COVID. Number two, young... If you're, 35 years old or younger, you've basically never seen the system work in your entire life, right? You've seen one failure of capitalism and democracy after another over the course of, this century really.

But the final thing I'll say is that young people are also much more like-- young Democrats, let's focus on them for a second-- are much more likely than, than other Democrats to be secular. And another thing that I'll say about the religious groupings that I mentioned earlier, the mainline center are also, you could also call them the civic center. They are the ones who are most trusting of anybody in the sample. They're least cynical. They're most likely to say that they like, again can work and can understand people from the other side. And so there might be a relationship between secularism and distrust.

GALSTON: Any other thoughts on this finding?

BARRÓN-LÓPEZ: As the 35-year-old on the panel I do feel, I do based on my - based on my life, based on the young people that I know, based on my nieces and nephew who are Gen Z, I'm a millennial. I think there is... i'm curious what the age grouping was for that because Gen Z I feel like even more than millennials exhibit this distrust. They are much more online. They, I think, have been far more influenced by social media than even I was. I

didn't have a smartphone until I was in college. So, I think all of that obviously contributes, the entire online ecosystem and media ecosystem that they have grown up in.

And also the fact that Gen Z, even more so than millennials, but yes, millennials to a degree, have only ever known politics under Donald Trump. And under MAGA Republicanism, not the conservative Republicanism that Whit and others have been talking about in the generations before. That's all that they've known, and so I think that they don't really understand what came before or what could come after. And they are operating in that arena.

And I think that they are very much overcome by almost a hopelessness about their ability to create a life for themselves, a successful life for themselves given the factors that are at play right now. Beyond, just the sheer negativity of the country's politics and the backwards movement that we're seeing across the board on LGBTQ, women's rights, you name it, treatment of immigrants, but then also artificial intelligence and that that fear that they're facing.

Because, and that is not being addressed, and that by this current administration young people are told, and even older Americans who are worried about data centers are told that the industry can regulate itself. So that's my-

JONES: Can I just add one, one quick th- oh, were you gonna jump in on that?

GALSTON: No.

JONES: Real quick. So we asked a bunch of stuff of like, of different kinds of people you might trust. What's notable is that the biggest generation gap is on people you meet for the first time. And I think this is relevant to what you're saying, right? Because I think there's a question of like, "Do I give somebody the benefit of the doubt when I first meet them," right? Or, "No, I gotta see who this person is," right? "Before I go, like, opening myself up." Yeah. I think that is... So just to show it is huge. Like, 18 to 29 year olds, only 33% say they would trust completely or trust somewhat people they meet for the first time. Among seniors it's 68%. Yeah.

BARRÓN-LÓPEZ: But what are the people older than 29?

JONES: They... what's interesting is that it's actually, it goes up. So, 30 to 49 it's 43%, 50 to 64 it's 51%, and then 65 plus it's 68. So just-

BARRÓN-LÓPEZ: Yeah, so Gen Z is kind of this-

JONES: Gen Z is-

BARRÓN-LÓPEZ: And younger are.

JONES: Yeah. Yeah. But this kind of 30 points, right, between Gen Z, kind of the younger Gen Z crowd. And I do think it's about the, the tribal- toxic political atmospheres. Like, I don't know who this person is. I'm gonna... They gotta show me their colors before-

BARKER: That, that could also have something to do with the, a shift in parenting styles across generations such that Gen Z grew up in households where their parents basically didn't let them go outside for stranger danger reasons, right?

Whereas I think all of us from older generations were left to, to run around the neighborhood pretty much by themselves, come home for dinner, and I think that when that's been deeply ingrained into your psyche your entire life, it might have, have an effect.

BARRÓN-LÓPEZ: Maybe a combination of that and the gentle parenting style.

BARKER: Yeah. Yeah.

GALSTON: Well, I wish we could go on in this vein forever, but we're, we have now reached the third and final part of the panel discussion, and that is the audience part. And while the physical audience is thinking of questions I'd like to kick off with one of the very thoughtful questions that has come in from our online audience, and here it is.

Samuel Huntington in his book, American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony, argued that the United States undergoes periodic events that he called creedal passion periods, where Americans debate and modify what the tenets of the American creed mean. Do you believe that we are in such a period right now?

Great question, huh? Panelists?

BARRÓN-LÓPEZ: I mean, yes. That's my answer.

BARKER: So, undeniably, and I'm curious if this person who wrote this question was listening to the same podcast that I was listening to yesterday on the New York Times. It was the interview with Bono and The Edge. And Bono actually cited this, this book by, by Huntington. And Huntington, in that book, which is old now, I think like maybe from the 90s, talks about the 1790s and the 1820s or '30s and then the 1890s and on forward to the 1960s, et cetera. And at, at the time said like, "Hey, if this pattern holds, then we're gonna be in another one of these periods in the 2020s." Right?

And it certainly does seem like we are in one of those periods. I think that we saw it when Robbie presented the results of this survey, like again and again and again and again. And it's not just these data. I mean, there are lots of other surveys and measures of public opinion that show just fundamental disagreements on not just the left and the right, but even within those two categories as to what it means to be American, what the essential American values are, what the definition, what the idea of America is.

AYRES: And we're gonna undergo that in both parties too after this election, I think. We talked about the socialists versus the non-socialists. But if the Republicans do as poorly as the polls would suggest in a couple of weeks there's gonna be a real debate within the Republican Party about where we go from here, and they're gonna have a, probably have a MAGA lane and a non-MAGA lane in the 2028 presidential nominating process. So I think both parties are gonna undergo a lot of this rediscovery of what it means to be a Democrat or what it means to be a Republican in this day and age.

BARRÓN-LÓPEZ: But on the question of what it means to be American, I think also, Trump Republicans, this administration, want to force that question, and they want to redefine that question. And Stephen Miller talks about it constantly, and I know it might be easy to ignore his public statements, but he repeatedly... He's out there across right-wing media almost every single day talking about who should and should not be American and what the definition of being American is. And that's why they attempted to undo birthright citizenship.

GALSTON: Well, in fairness the vice president of the United States has made this issue the centerpiece of a number of very well thought through and delivered speeches. And so I think the proposition that this question of the meaning of the American creed, what it means to be an American, who is an American, is now on the agenda. And and it's gonna stay there, I believe.

Okay. Yes, there's a question from this gentleman in the center row. Please stand up and identify yourself.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Ken Lieberthal, was at Brookings for many years, now retired. One of the startling revelations from your survey is that roughly 35% of Americans think that if there is serious concern about voter fraud in a locality, that the federal government should take the ballot boxes and count them, count the votes. Who decides whether there's serious concern about voter fraud? What are the criteria? President Trump has made abundantly clear that any election that doesn't go his way or the way of his the, the people that he's promoted is fraudulent

And so kind of what is the do you have any idea of what people thought of as legitimate serious concern?

JONES: Yeah.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Thank you.

JONES: Well, I'll jump in here. So I, just make sure you... So go back to the... So it's a a agree, disagree question. Here is the wording. If there are serious concerns about voter fraud in a local voting location, the president should order federal agents to seize the ballots and take over the vote counting.

So that's what the respondents had to respond to. So we didn't spell it out, we didn't, we did say serious concerns about voter fraud. I'm with you, I'm kind of worried about that, 'cause I mean, that could be a fairly low bar, right? It could be a declaration by the, by a single person in the executive office. That, that is in fact now the case. And then we're off to the races and and it is, it's, it is 35% of the public. It's mostly driven by, by Republicans at 58%, right? Who would agree with that that thing. So, it would clearly be illegal and unconstitutional.

BARRÓN-LÓPEZ: Yes. That's what I was about to say.

JONES: So let me just say that like very clearly for that to happen, right? But nonetheless-

GALSTON: That used to be quite significant, as I recall.

JONES: Right. And so for the law and order party to say that, yes, we should go in and a federal agent should seize the ballots is quite, quite something.

BARRÓN-LÓPEZ: Right. If you talk to... i've talked to a number of secretaries of state, including Republicans, who have said that is not... it is illegal for him to do that. You have to get judicial warrants. Judges have to sign off for any kind of federal agents to go into these polling locations. Even if he were to declare a national emergency, he doesn't have the authority to do that. Also, he will immediately be met with any kind, like litigation across the board. And the courts would stop action like that.

JONES: But then we look at the East Wing of the White House.

BARRÓN-LÓPEZ: Right.

GALSTON: Or the golf course.

JONES: Yeah, or the golf course, yes.

GALSTON: Right.

BARRÓN-LÓPEZ: To date, I mean, he has lost across the board on almost every single attempt to interfere in the election process.

GALSTON: Any other comments on?

BARKER: But it might take a while, though. Just to sort out.

BARRÓN-LÓPEZ: Well, you can, the courts can move quickly if they have to move quickly. They can call, issue an TRO like overnight or same day if they have to.

AYRES: Laura's point's a good one. The Constitution is crystal clear who runs elections, and it's not the federal government.

GALSTON: Yeah. No, I was going to call on you. So wait, please wait until a, a microphone reaches you.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Oh, all right. Thank you, sir. I just wanna follow up on that because what I found troubling in that report was that 18% of Democrats and 16% of Democrats thought it was okay for the federal government to interfere in elections or intervene. So it suggests that, aren't Democrats getting squishier? And aren't Democrats falling into, beginning to take in some of the Trumpism federal control? Thank you.

JONES: Yeah, you're right. So I mean, it's, there are 18% of Democrats, right, who agree with that statement. So yeah, I'm not sure what to make of that to tell you the truth. But so maybe it's inroads, maybe it's desperation. It could also mean... I mean, this is the real danger, I think, if we go much, like, we as a country go too further down this road, is that people stop believing in the integrity of elections, then people start being willing to take more desperate measures, right? Across the board.

BARKER: I think that there are a lot of Democrats who are worried about what this administration is going to do with regard to this election cycle, and some of those Democrats in, in the survey might have been thinking in those terms, right, when they did that.

And let's also remember I think that the average American has, has no idea that constitutionally elections have to be run at the state level. And you just hear that, that survey question, and let's take it at face value and not informed by everything that we've observed over the course of the past eight years or whatever it's been.

If there actually were serious concerns, like, I mean, like, let's say that we actually know that there's not, right? But if there were, let's say that, that legitimate informational authorities, came and had some evidence and it was in The New York Times and it was that, everybody kinda like agreed like, "Wow," like, "Gee, this is like something serious we need to worry about here."

Well, then it wouldn't be... aside from the constitutional aspect, it wouldn't be a completely unreasonable response to say like, "Well, yeah. Geez, I guess maybe the feds should go in there and, and do something about that." And so some Democrats might be responding that way.

GALSTON: Yeah. Let me switch back to another online question for a minute. Here's the question.

Are the social and cultural issues used by the MAGA movement losing their effectiveness, or is that cultural and social playbook just being temporarily eclipsed by concerns about the economy and the war? Are we seeing a shift in our politics back towards a more traditional focus on peace and prosperity, or is this just a blip on the new, in the new cultural politics? That's the question.

AYRES: It's a blip. The concern about wokeism is still there. The opposition to genetic males playing female sports is still there, including a majority of Democrats. But they've simply been overwhelmed by the economic concerns, by the war in Iran, and all of its associated inflationary effects. But don't misunder- don't misinterpret that reality because that wokeism and the concern about it is still very much present in the culture.

BARKER: It is. I would also say though, that I'm not sure that the social and cultural issues were necessarily ever driving anything. In 2020, Kamala Harris and, before that Joe Biden, the, the Biden administration essentially lost re-election for the same reasons that, that all administrations lose reelections when they do, which is that in this case inflation massively outpaced wage growth, right?

The old "economy, stupid" thing, like what rang true just like it always does. I mean, the, the average purchasing power for most Americans greatly reduced from 2020 to 2024, and so the party in power got punished in the same way that has continued now right over the course of the past two years, and the party in power is getting punished. It's the same story.

AYRES: Exactly.

BARRÓN-LÓPEZ: I would also argue that, white grievance, immigration, all of that, the, attacks on the other, that has been a part of MAGA Republicanism from the beginning, and that it's not going anywhere. And to Whit's earlier point about the survey and his big takeaway, that question around immigration, which is a cultural question, it is an identity question, it's not just an - it's also an economic question- is something that Americans have to contend with and decide what direction they wanna go in.

And the argument from Trump, Stephen Miller, Mullins, JD Vances of the world is not going anywhere either, and they are going to continue to say that as many people as possible, regardless of their criminal histories, have to be deported. And to strip status away from people who had lawful status, they would also continue that.

JONES: So we did some analysis looking at this question, of how much kind of so-called cultural issues, immigration, abortion, whatever played versus economic issues in the first Trump 1.0. That analysis, did a bunch of regression models, it basically - it's worth noting the answer to that is yes right? That they both matter. But if you were gonna make a recipe for sort of MAGA 1.0 and Trump's rise to power, it would actually be two parts cultural issues and one part economic issue. That would be the recipe for making it.

So they both work together, but I think the heart of it, and if you listen to the campaign trail, the things that Trump is continually doubling down on, it's not trying to figure out how can we make moves that'll be better economically. It's really doubling down on immigration, doubling down on the mass deportation stuff. And that part of it goes to the... Because that question is linked to the question of, yeah, who are we? Who are we gonna be as a country?

And there's one note of caution here, I think for Democrats that I would love... I'm gonna, like, my last word here is, I do think the real danger for Democrats is to think that you're going to confront a big meta-narrative about who we are as the country with affordability. Like, that is not going to be a matched conversation. Yes, like in a short-term thing, absolutely. We see in the survey healthcare, rising cost of everyday goods, all of that, inflation, absolutely. But in the longer term thing, we're, sort of, we're gonna collectively have to have this conversation about who we are as a country, and I think both parties are gonna have to be able to meet on that ground. And if we don't, I think that two parts cultural thing and one part economic thing, the cultural question's gonna swamp the other one.

GALSTON: Well, I wish we could go on forever. But we can't. We've reached the end. Indeed, we've gone slightly over our allotted time. I got permission in advance to do this, but I'm now pushing up against the limits.

I wanna close with a lot of thank yous. First of all a thank you to the leadership and the staff of the Public Religion Research Institute for a superb professional and human collaboration over a period of seventeen years. It has been a joy from beginning to end, and I hope this is not the end.

Secondly, I wanna thank the crack-- thank the crack Brookings team, the ABA- ABS team, and specifically our event coordinator, Maryam al-Hassani, for a typically superb job of organizing this and equipping not only the moderator, but everybody else with exactly what they needed in order, in, in, in order to put this event on.

And finally, I hope you'll all join me in thanking a wonderful group of panelists for a superb discussion. And with that, we are adjourned.