

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

WEBINAR

MIDTERM ELECTIONS AND THE FUTURE OF CONGRESS AND THE PRESIDENCY

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PANEL DISCUSSION

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TENPAS: Good morning, and thank you for joining us. We're just about two weeks away from election day, and the results will have a profound impact on the final two years of the Trump administration and well as the-- as well as the institution of Congress. Today's panel promises to provide new insights and deep analysis into the forthcoming congressional elections, mostly because we have a distinguished set of panelists.

Erin Covey, she leads the Cook Political Reports coverage of the House of Representatives and possesses a deep knowledge of all aspects of these forthcoming elections. Second, we have Chris Warshaw, a political scientist and professor at Georgetown's McCourt School of Public Policy. His research on the electoral process has been widely published, particularly in the leading political science journals. And finally, we have Bill Galston, first and foremost my colleague and office neighbor, and a senior fellow in governance studies. He's also a columnist for The Wall Street Journal and recently published the article Trump's Approval Slump and Candidate Quality Drive the 2026 Senate Races. He wrote that with our colleague Elaine Kamarck.

So welcome everybody. I think I'll just kick it off with a good broad question to Erin and ask Erin, based on your reporting, what is the best guess on the outcome of the November 3rd elections?

All right.

COVEY: Hi, Katie. Thank you for having me on. So, at this point of the Cook Political Report, what we are forecasting is that in the Senate, Democrats are poised to flip anywhere from two to six seats. Of course, they need four seats for a majority, so that leaves control of the Senate as basically a pure tossup. We may adjust that range in the final few weeks, but that is where things stand right now. At the House, we're expecting that Democrats flip on net between 10 and 20 seats. That would give them a majority at either end of that spectrum. On the upper end of that spectrum, they would have 235 seats, which is what they had when they started 2019 after the 2018 midterms.

So all in all, we're looking at a political environment that is very good for Democrats. We have known that it was likely going to be good for them for a while both given history, which is on side of the Democrats. Almost always the party out of power picks up seats in the House in midterm elections.

There were only two midterm cycles in modern history where that was not the case. And then, of course, the president's approval rating has been a huge drag on Republicans across the country. The president's approval rating has been under 40% for the past several months. It's shown no signs of recovering.

A lot of that was driven by the war with Iran, of course, but it's also the accumulation of frustration with the president's handling of economic issues, ranging from tariffs to health care funding. So all in all, we're looking at a very good environment for Democrats. I think it's still not clear exactly how deep into the map Democrats can play.

Some of that is simply due to the fact that they have less money than Republicans, and so they have fewer resources to invest in some of these reach seats. But regardless of how much they ... how further they can expand the map, I think that they are going to be in a very good position to win the House, and the Senate potentially as well.

TENPAS: Thank you. That was really succinct and direct. Appreciate it. Chris maybe you could provide some historical context on these upcoming elections. What's happened in the past that might shed light on these elections?

WARSHAW: Katie, first of all, thanks for having me as part of this event. And broadly speaking, I agree with Erin's analysis to the overall map right now.

And we know from history that over the past 100 years, the president's party has lost about 27 seats on average in midterm elections. And over the past 100 years, there's only been three times that the president's party hasn't lost seats. And that's 1934 during the Great Depression, 1998 during Clinton's impeachment, and 2002 in the immediate wake of 9/11.

So I think the optimistic case for Republicans would have to be that this election looks like one of those three. And I think, you know, we're not in the Great Depression, we haven't gone through a recent impeachment of a president, and 9/11 didn't just happen. So I think probably, you know, none of those look great for the president's party right now.

Instead I think we look more like a 2006 environment when just like today we had an unpopular foreign war. But I think what's different from 2006 is the economy. You know, presidential approval today is worse than 2006. People feel a little bit more glum about the economy. So, you know, probably we're more-- If anything, it looks more like 2008, I would say, in this environment.

And in that, in 2008, Democrats won the popular vote by about nine points in congressional elections. Now just to build on what Erin said on the Senate, the history is much less clear in the Senate that the out party always wins seats. About three-quarters of the time the out party tends to win seats in the Senate.

And of course, the Senate map and candidate quality play important roles in Senate elections. And this year the Senate map cuts in favor of Republicans while candidate quality probably helps Democrats a little bit. So I think Democrats are probably slightly favored in the Senate, but there it's much less clear than in the House.

TENPAS: And can you explain a little bit why presidents have such difficulty in these midterm elections? What's happening in the environment that makes it difficult?

WARSHAW: Yeah. Well, I think what we know from political science research is there's really two big-picture explanations. One is the president's party always has lower turnout rates in midterms than the challenging party. You know, the challenging party tends to get fired up about whatever the president's doing, while the president's supporters tend to be a little bit complacent maybe. And this happens every single midterm.

And second of all, we tend to see a little bit of - on the margin, we have what's called balancing, where people tend to wanna balance the president's power with an opposition party controlling Congress, so the president can't do too much over the last over the next two years of their term.

And one of the reasons we know that's happening is because the polls predictably move in favor of the challenging party in the months before the election, as people seem to, you

know, more aggressively wanna balance the president's power. And those two phenomena happen even when the president's popular, even when there's a good economy. You know, and today the president, of course, is unpopular, and we have a relatively poor economy. So it's, I would expect both of those factors to matter even more than they normally do.

TENPAS: Yeah, and you make an interesting point by referring to the election in 2006, because that was also Bush's second term. And even though we had the Biden administration in between the two Trump administrations, this is indeed his second term. Is there anything unique about the second term, or is it, are those midterm elections just, it sounds like they're reasonably predictable as well, and that the fact that it's his second term doesn't really matter?

WARSHAW: It's hard to say. I would say from history, you know, I think the overall second terms don't look dramatically different from first terms. But what, certainly in recent years, it looks like presidents do a little bit worse in their second midterm maybe, but I wouldn't put too much stock in that.

TENPAS: Okay.

Great. Terrific. Bill, I'm gonna turn to you. You are truly a student of public opinion. So what are voters thinking these days, and how has it changed since November of '24?

GALSTON: Well, if I were to choose one word to characterize many of the people who voted for Donald Trump in 2024, that word would be disappointed. And I say that because Trump has not done what he said he was going to do, that is focus relentlessly on prices and bring them down. He has done what he said he wouldn't do, and that is start yet another difficult war in the Middle East, where it's a lot easier to get in than it is to get out. And third, he has taken what should have been his big winning issue, namely immigration, and turned it into a jump ball because while people liked what he's done at the southern border, they have disapproved of the tactics that he's used in the interior of the country to try to round up immigrants and deport them.

During the 2024 campaign, he kept on talking about the worst of the worst, and people supported that. You know, if they're violent criminals and thugs who are, in addition, here in the United, here in the United States without legal authorization, there's absolutely no argument against finding them, arresting them, incarcerating them, and then deporting them.

But that's not what people are seeing. They are seeing their friends and neighbors, people who in many cases are making very distinct and visible economic contributions to their communities, being round up and, rounded up and deported frequently without even a gesture towards the legal niceties that supposedly are built into the immigration system as protections against mistakes.

So you add all of that up, and I think the dominant sentiment among a decisive chunk of 2024 Trump voters is, we did not get what we thought we were voting for. And that shift, which is particularly visible among Hispanics, but also among young people and independents, I think will drive the overall votes in this election.

And I think we're in agreement that will cash out into a significant Democratic gain in the House. I can't find a serious analyst who thinks that the Republicans are going to retain

control of the House. I'm not even sure the Speaker of the House thinks that the Republicans are gonna keep control of the House.

But where these different currents that are flowing through the body politic, you know, ebb and flow, wax and wane, is in the individual Senate races because individual Senate races are much more focused on the character and competence of well-known candidates. House elections have been almost fully nationalized. Not so for Senate elections. And we could have a very interesting fine-grain conversation about specific Senate races that illustrate that point.

TENPAS: Yeah, I hope to get that to that later in our conversation today. But can you tell me a little bit... So it sounds as though there's a huge disjunct between campaign promises in 2024 and the reality of the first two years of the Trump administration.

Can you think of other parallels in history where there's also been this sort of backlash to what presidents or candidates promised, and how the voters perceived a president's inability to follow through or actually to do the contrary response to those promises?

GALSTON: Well, Barack Obama campaigned as a unifier. I think his image was first set in the public mind in his famous 2004 address to the Democratic National Convention, where he memorably announced there's not a red America or blue America, but just one United States of America. And he goes on to talk about, you know, people in blue states who worship the awesome God and people in red states, et cetera, et cetera. I mean, I'm sure there are Obama-ites who can recite that entire address by heart. I'm not one of them. But in the eyes of many people afterwards, once he took office, he campaigned as more of a Democrat and less of a unifier, and I think that was symbolized by the fact that the signature legislative achievement of the Obama administration, the Affordable Care Act was pushed through with not a single Republican supporting it, not even the most liberal.

And that produced a huge backlash in 2010. And if I recall correctly, Democrats lost more than 60 House seats. I'd also point painfully to a similar experience that occurred when I was in the White House in 1994, where Bill Clinton had campaigned as a moderate. But he was seen as having done the bidding of more traditional Democrats during his first two years, and not without cause, right?

He gave the public every reason to expect that he would lead off with welfare reform, which he discussed on a daily basis during the 1992 campaign. And I think he surprised a lot of people by shelving welfare reform and turning instead to the traditional Democratic focus on health care reform. The early conversation about gays in the military convinced a lot of swing voters that he wasn't the cultural moderate that he'd campaigned as, et cetera, et cetera.

And so Democrats lost more than 50 seats in 1994. You know, a day I remember quite painfully. So this is-

TENPAS: Sorry to bring that up.

GALSTON: Well, I inflicted it on myself. But this is a not unfamiliar pattern, right, where candidates find it difficult to govern as they campaigned, and their party pays the price.

TENPAS: Right. Terrific. Erin, I'm gonna turn back to you, and I'm wondering, given your sort of focus on this issue, can you talk about how the election predictions have changed just over the course of the past 10 months, and what factors have influenced these changes in the data that you're seeing? So for instance, races turning from safe seats to competitive seats or to toss-ups, what have you.

COVEY: There has definitely been a lot of shifts in the vibe over the last 10 months. I think from the beginning, though, it has been clear that Democrats were favored to take back the House. I would say that 10 months ago, the biggest outstanding question was what was happening with redistricting in all of these states.

We saw a total of nine states redraw their district lines this cycle a fairly unprecedented amount of mid-decade redistricting that was largely done for political reasons. It was started by Republicans in Texas, and then Democrats responded in California, and then it began to spiral a bit out of control.

Of course, we saw some of those efforts failed. Republicans' efforts in Missouri failed this cycle. Democrats' efforts in Virginia failed this cycle as well. But there were so many shifts that were happening with that at the time that I think there was still concern on Democrats' part that Republicans may be able to preserve a path to holding the majority just through redistricting alone.

Well, now that we are two weeks out from the election, our assessment is that Republicans will maybe net around three seats due to redistricting alone. That is not a lot. There's a world in which the environment is so bad for them that they don't net any at all, and that's because the bulk of these districts that were redrawn under the assessment, I think, that it would be a better or at least less terrible political environment for Republicans than what has panned out.

I think many of these seats will be tough for Democrats to hold in 2028 if they do hold them this cycle. But what we're seeing across the board is that redistricting itself is not going to play a major factor in which party controls the House. The other dynamic, of course, that has shifted over the last 10 months is that public opinion has solidified.

Democrats' lead on the generic ballot has opened up to about a nine-point lead at this point. That's better than it was at this point going into the 2018 midterms. Over the summer, it was closer to D plus five or six. And of course, We didn't know, you know, there was a lot more variance in the polling.

We would sometimes see polls where Democrats up 10 points at the generic. Some polls show Democrats up two points on the generic. And so that has really solidified. So we have the political environment itself on a national level has become more clear. And then the other final dynamic that is important for evaluating the races on a race-by-race basis, which we do, is that we actually know how the political environment looks in these individual districts and states.

You know, what we do with Cook Political Report, we try not to superimpose what looks like a good national environment on top of every race equally because there are individual factors that go into every single race, whether that's the candidates themselves, some of the statewide and regional political environments.

For example, Democrats look a lot better in the Midwest than in New York right now. And then of course, the spending itself does matter still in all of these races, and Republicans, you know, came into this cycle with a massive spending advantage on the super PAC side that we were not sure how they were going to use.

What has happened is that Republicans have definitely used that spending advantage in the Senate races to try to attempt to shore up their majority there, even as they largely concede that the House is probably gone at this point. But at the House level, the spending has actually been relatively even between the parties.

Republicans have a slight edge right now, but it's not significant. And also the rate that these super PACs are paying for, for to air these ads is a lot higher than it is for the candidates themselves. And so Democratic candidates' fundraising advantage works to their advantage in a lot of these races.

So I would say that is kind of what goes into the final weeks of analysis and race rating shifts that we're doing. We're also getting a lot of polling, particularly in House races, that is off the record. In House races, there is very little public polling that is high quality at this point, unfortunately.

There's a decent amount in the Senate races, of course, but there aren't a lot of pollsters who are polling the House races at least nonpartisan pollsters. But we talk to the campaigns and the super PACs and the campaign committees, and they will share their own data with us off the record, and that helps inform the ratings that we're making, particularly in the House.

TENPAS: Yeah. Yeah, that's terrific. So you mentioned that there were with all of the redistricting, there was probably a gain of three seats for the Republicans. And I just want to know, like, what were they expecting to gain? How many seats did they think the redistricting... And maybe you don't know this for certain, but if you could estimate. So it's like, what's the denominator? Three out of how many were they potentially hoping to get? Like, how bad is three in terms of a net?

COVEY: Again, it's kind of hard to say what the high point for them was. But I think there was a world in which this spring, after the Supreme Court had weakened the Voting Rights Act that enabled a number of states to redraw their lines at the last minute, I think there was concern that potentially Republicans could net as many as a dozen seats due to redistricting alone.

But that always seemed optimistic in our view, and that's because, again, at that point, we knew that the political environment was not going to be good for them. And just because Trump had carried a seat by 10 points, particularly in some of these Florida and Texas districts that were heavily Hispanic, did not mean that Republicans were going to be able to replicate that in 2026.

And so all of these maps that Republicans drew from Texas to Florida to North Carolina to even Alabama, all of these seats do favor Republicans more than they did before. So it's not like the, the map itself was poorly drawn, but the environment is so bad that is not going to matter. Democrats are still going to be able to win a lot of these races, despite the fact that Republicans should be favored in them normally.

WARSHAW: I agree with everything Erin said about the maps. The thing that I'd add is that they were targeted, I think, for a world where Congress-- where we had roughly tied national vote, and control of Congress was really up for grabs. And I think in that world, the maps would have given Republicans a very profound advantage.

Probably they'd have an eight to ten seat advantage in a tied national environment, and Democrats probably would need to win the national popular vote by three or four points in order to win control of the House. Now, in a midterm environment in twenty twenty-six, that's not gonna stop Democrats from taking control of the House.

But in 2028 or 2030, I think the mid-decade redistrictings will have a much more important impact

GALSTON: Erin, I have a question for you and I'll address it to Chris as well. It's my impression, and I think the impression is widespread that there has been a long-term secular decline in the number of truly competitive House seats. I think Cook Political Report has done some serious work on this, and I wondered whether that impression was correct, and if so, how you, and Chris if you have views on the subject, would explain it

COVEY: Yes, Bill, there's certainly been a decline in the number of swing seats over time. That decline, I would say, has largely happened in the past 30 to 40 years. In the past 10 years, we haven't seen a dramatic decline of that significant of a magnitude, I would say. But there certainly has been a decline overall. I mean, at this point, really just 10% of seats are truly competitive.

Now, of course, in a wave cycle, you have seats that aren't within that bucket that the other party can win. But in a typical political, neutral political environment, we're looking at, you know, a world in which maybe three dozen seats are truly competitive at the House level. And that is for a number of reasons that Chris can get into as well.

Top lines are people now live around people who vote the same way that they do. We call that phenomenon geographic sorting. And so there aren't that many, you know, Democrats who are living in rural areas. There's fewer Republicans in urban areas. And then, of course, redistricting has played a role as well.

And the states in which one party controls the redistricting process, they have been able to draw maps that disproportionately favor their party. Republicans have done this more because they control the redistricting process in more states, but Democrats do it too in places like Illinois and Maryland. And so for that reason the number of swing seats has declined.

We've also just seen a decline in the amount of split-ticket voting. There used to be a lot more places where you would see Blue Dog Democrats winning, for example, seats that voted for Republicans at the presidential level by large margins. We don't really see that anymore. Occasionally, we'll see certain members, like a Jared Golden, for example, in Maine's 2nd District, who is able to over-perform a generic Democrat or a Democrat on the presidential level by a pretty significant margin. But those members are the exception, not the rule.

TENPAS: All right. I'm sorry about the technological glitch. But I wanted to ask Chris, I know you've done a lot of research on redistricting. And I was wondering, Erin alluded to the surge of mid-decade redistricting. I wonder if you could tell us about that and just sort of give us a little bit of a history of the, of redistricting and are you surprised that there are only probably three Republican gains due to these efforts and how do you feel about it?

WARSHAW: Let me get to that in a second. Just to build on the point about competitive districts in a second. And I agree with the point that the-- for all the reasons Erin said, the number of competitive districts has declined. But I think an interesting paradox is despite this decline in competitive districts, we still have these predictable midterm waves.

And this year, even though there probably are only three dozen very close districts in presidential elections, we're likely to have more districts than that change hands. Or at least there's a very good chance of that. And I think one of the reasons for that is that there continue to be these large midterm waves.

So in midterm environments, even districts that don't look like they're competitive become competitive when the national popular vote shifts by ten points. But also, we don't have as-- a large incumbency advantage anymore. So it used to be the case that you'd have lots of districts that looked competitive based on the presidential vote, but then, you know, the incumbent, as long as the incumbent ran for re-election, they had this huge incumbency advantage.

And now it is, you know, the incumbency advantage is quite small. It's still there, but it's much smaller than it used to be. And so the incumbency advantage is not gonna protect a lot of the particularly Republican incumbents this year. But in 2022, it also didn't help protect some of the Democratic incumbents that lost.

Whereas in previous cycles, I think the incumbency advantage really helped some of the marginal legislators hang on. So I think actually-- So it's sort of, for all-- for those reasons, control of Congress still often changes hands despite the lack of the, the fewer number of districts that look competitive. So in, in terms of the mid-decade redistrictings, you know, this is obviously pretty rare to see. We haven't seen anything like this in a long time.

And but what I worry about is that the, the cat's out of the bag. The, you know, the Pandora's box has been opened now, and I don't see any reason to think we won't continue to see this going into the future. And I think what the main-- A lot of the progress against gerrymandering had been the establishment of nonpartisan commissions in many states, which political science research has shown made a huge difference in reducing the partisan bias of maps and really constraining both parties from drawing un small D democratic gerrymanders.

And I think that what's gonna happen over the next couple years is probably many of those nonpartisan commissions are gonna get you know, pulled back and gonna get disassembled either at the ballot box or through the legislative process. And I think, you know, we're not gonna see any more states establish nonpartisan commissions in the foreseeable future. And so a lot of the progress we've made against gerrymandering you know, is really gonna get wound down, which is really sad.

TENPAS: Do you expect to see more mid-decade redistricting in the years ahead before we get to 2030?

WARSHAW: Yes. I think there's very likely to be more more mid-decade redistrict things in 2028.

And then if you know, 2030 to where- regard- whatever, who, if there's a Democratic president in 2030, there'll be a Republican wave in, or in 2030. And, you know, there'll be more pro-Republican mid-decade gerrymanders. If there's a - if there's a Republican president, the Democrats will do well, and so probably they'll do some more mid-decade gerrymanders. So I don't see any reason to think both parties won't continue to do this until there's a national legislation that, that reins in gerrymandering.

TENPAS: Wow, that's very interesting. So even though this year's gains are not at all what they thought they would be in terms of yielding seats the trend and the efforts to try to sort of gain the elections will still continue.

WARSHAW: 100%. We're still in the early stages of this.

TENPAS: Okay, great. Thank you. Bill, I want to turn to you. You first spoke about kind of the disjunct between campaign promises and performance. What do the most recent surveys tell us about the electorate's mood and the likely outcome?

GALSTON: It's really pretty simple. You know, the president's overall job approval, depending on which poll you look at, is mired in the mid-30s. Some polls put it in the high 30s, some in the low 30s. It also matters whether you're talking about all the people, registered voters or likely voters. The president does slightly better among likely voters.

But overall because the president's job approval is perhaps the single most important leading indicator of voting patterns in midterm elections, Republicans are very worried about the decline in the president's standings, which has been measurable just in the past three or four months. It could not have come at a worse time. So that's point number one.

Point number two is that approval of the president's handling of the single most important economic issue, namely jobs, rather, namely prices, is much lower than his overall job approval. In some surveys, it's down in the 20s. Other than core MAGA supporters, it is very difficult to find any appreciable pool of voters who think that the president has done a good job managing inflation, high prices, affordability, call it what you will.

Second key point In American history, at least the point of it that's been subject to reliable polling, wars typically begin with majority support, and then as they go on, lose support. The Iran war is an exception. It never enjoyed majority support from the day it began, and it has steadily lost ground as what was supposed to be a very short war has turned into a longer war without any clear exit strategy, at least that the administration has been willing to articulate publicly. And that, I think, has been a huge factor, and it's led to some very overt and visible splits within the Republican Party, even within the the president's core coalition, because a lot of the MAGA voters really took him seriously. You know, these were people who from the very first presidential debate in August of 2015, heard the president denounce endless wars in the Middle East and promised that he wasn't gonna start any more of them. He would be, in that sense, the peace Republican candidate as opposed to the warlike

tendencies of the establishment of both the Democrat and the Republican parties. So embarking on the war a war against Iran, I think has come as a very nasty shock to voters who thought that the president meant precisely what he said, and have always regarded him as a straight shooter, the guy who does what he says he's going to do.

I could go on. You know, there are lots of interesting, there are lots of interesting details in the surveys. I would say that breaking things down by individual groups, the single most disappointed group in the electorate is Hispanic Americans. And that because, as I've been tracking them for a long time, they are the single group in the, the voting population that gives most weight to the performance of the economy. You know, these are, these are working-class voters. These are small business people. These are not folks with a lot of economic slack. And whether inflation is at one and a half percent or three and a half percent makes a big difference to them. Whether their real wages are going up by a point or two or down by a point or two really makes a big difference. And if you're a small business person, interest rates make a big difference. You frequently have to borrow money against future sales. So they have been massively disappointed.

And as I think Errin pointed out, a lot of the redistricting in Texas and Florida rested on the proposition that the president's gains among Hispanics in 2024 had created a new baseline that Republicans could count on. And anything, you know, and that's anything but the case. In fact, Hispanics have turned into, I think, the ultimate swing voters in the new American electorate. And both political parties are gonna have to take that seriously.

TENPAS: Yeah. Yeah. I also wanna put in a plug. Tomorrow there will be another event at Brookings on the American Values Survey, and you can learn even more about public opinion of late. So that's Bill Galston's event tomorrow. E.J. Dionne will also be there as well.

So I wanna turn back to Erin. I know that you've covered House and Senate campaigns for a lot of your career. Can you talk a little bit about maybe what surprised you most in this particular season?

COVEY: Yeah, that's a good question. I think you know, the elasticity of these Hispanic districts should not be that big of a surprise because these are places that, for example, in South Texas and the Rio Grande Valley, these districts voted for Hillary Clinton by double digits in 2016, but had steadily been moving to the right since then. Biden did not do nearly as well as Clinton did in a lot of these places. And then, of course, in 2024, Trump won many of these districts by double digits.

And so now that we have these districts swinging back towards Democrats by, you know, 20-plus point margins, it has really been striking to see. A district, for example, that voted for Trump by 17 points in 2024 polling now shows that James Talarico is leading in this district by several points. So the amount of swings that we're seeing with Hispanic districts in particular, I wouldn't say that's been surprising, but it has really been striking how dramatic that has been.

At the same time, we're also seeing Democrats do well in parts of the country that they really have not done well in since the Obama era, which has been interesting to watch, places like upstate New York and southern Minnesota. These are districts that in the past decade have largely voted for Republicans by double digits. But I think these are also parts of the country that are, again, more susceptible to economic frustrations that are driving a lot of voters'

choices this fall. And so, you know, these white working-class districts that Trump, you know, made significant gains with back in 2016 and this also applies, for example, to places like Ohio and Iowa that have trended to the right significantly over the past decade.

There're also parts of the country where you have voters who are more affected by the president's handling of the economy, and so they're maybe more likely to swing back towards Democrats in a more dramatic fashion than maybe, you know, some of these suburban districts which, you know, we expect to see a swing to the left across the map, but it's gonna be more dramatic in some places than in others. And I think that is a part of the reason that we see Democrats doing well in places like southern Minnesota, upstate New York, Ohio, and Iowa. It is really remarkable to see the fact that in both of those states Democrats lead the polling in the gubernatorial and Senate races.

You know, I think those races are still quite close and Republican spending could make the difference there at the end of the day. And of course, there's also always concern and panic about what if the polls are undercounting Republican voters in these places. But, you know, I think at this point it is fair to say that Democrats are doing much better in these parts of the country than they were, you know, two years ago, even four years ago, six years ago.

And so that has been a bit of a surprising trend and has, you know, resulted in the fact that you have, you know, very competitive races in places that Trump won by 20 points. But to be clear, this is not happening across the board. A district that Trump won by 20 points and like suburban Dallas, for example, that is not going to swing to the left at the same level that we're seeing New York's 21st District swing to the left.

Which is why it's important to look at these, you know, races on a race-by-race basis and see how the, you know, different economic realities have affected different parts of the country in various ways.

TENPAS: Yeah.

GALSTON: Katie, if I could just add a word on exactly that point. No sector of the economy has been harder hit by Trump's policies than the rural farm and agricultural sector. And, you know, I could go through chapter and verse on that, but I think people know the basics, and that is why you have the president and the vice president and other senior Republicans showing up in places like Kansas and Nebraska. This is amazing, right? And that is the heart of the traditional Republican constituency. These are not Johnny-come-lately Republicans. Last time the state of Kansas sent a Democrat to the Senate was in 1932, and yet there's a highly competitive Senate race there. So, you know, a lot of chickens are coming home to roost here.

And there's one other that we haven't mentioned, namely anger in the African American community over the assault on majority Black districts, which is going to have at least as great an impact on Senate races, in mobilizing Black voters against Republicans, including Republican incumbents, than it will in the House races.

TENPAS: Yeah. Chris, I know that --

WARSHAW: Just to quickly build on both of those remarks. And I think the, what surprises me is again, over the long term that what we've seen in, particularly in 2018 but over the last

couple cycles, is this gradual move of sort of well-educated suburbanites for Democrats and working-class voters toward Republicans. And that seems to have been - at least in polling, that seems to have been reversed at the national level this cycle, which I think has surprised me.

Like, I think in January of 2025, I would've guessed the national, roughly the national generic ballot or something close to it. But the the composition of that under the hood, I think, has been very interesting, and I don't think, you know, a lot of, many people expected it.

And I agree that what that's meant is Democrats have had outside gains with Hispanics. And Black turnout, which was actually way down relative to whites over the last couple of cycles, the early indicators are that Black turnout seems to be recovering relative to whites. And it'll be interesting to see if that continues in the, in the last two weeks of voting.

TENPAS: Yeah. Thank you, Chris. And Bill, I wanna turn back to you. The article that you wrote with Elaine Kamarck about Senate races and about the quality of Senate candidates as well as the declining approval ratings. And you made it pretty clear that one of the best predictors about the outcome of midterm elections is the status of presidents' approval ratings.

But can you talk about the article that you co-authored and tell us a little bit more about Senate races?

GALSTON: Yes. We of course talked about the national landscape and which we focused on so far in this discussion. But candidate quality also makes a difference in, especially in Senate races.

And, you know, we broke things down. There are four states where President Trump's personal intervention has brought about the nomination of Republican Senate candidates who are weaker than the alternatives, and that may turn out to be decisive. Texas is exhibit A, but it's not the only one.

President Trump personally intervened in Georgia to ensure the nomination of a MAGA loyal candidate who is losing to the incumbent Democrat, Jon Ossoff, by very wide margins, at least by Georgia standards. North Carolina, President Trump insisted that the Republicans nominate someone whose most conspicuous characteristic was utter abject loyalty to Donald J. Trump. And Roy Cooper is leading in North Carolina by margins that are very unusual in that purple state that leans slightly slightly Republican. And then the shocker, John C. Calhoun's native ground, South Carolina, the president intervened to ensure that the late Senator Lindsey Graham would be replaced as the Republican nominee by his sister, whose only visible qualification for the office is that she was, and still is, I guess, Lindsey Graham's sister. And when she admitted in her first public debate that she really didn't know very much about foreign policy, which is one of the distinctive responsibilities of a senator in our system that, that was the capstone. So that's one set of candidates where quality matters.

But on the other hand you have you have states where Democrats in principle should have excellent prospects where they're struggling to win. Maine and Michigan would be the two examples of that for different reasons. And you know, Michigan may be the most interesting Senate race of all. So, yesterday the Democratic candidate, Abdul El-Sayed, was

campaigning in the Upper Peninsula in areas that regularly vote Republican by 60% or more, while Republican candidate Mike Rogers was campaigning in Black areas of Southeast Michigan. Go figure. And we could write a book, I think, just about the Michigan Senate race this time for all sorts of reasons, including the possibility that it could yield the first Muslim American to enter the US Senate.

TENPAS: Great. Thank you. Chris, I want to go back to you. In part I'm gonna segue to audience Q&A, but I also just wanna ask, based on your research, what is surprising you this election cycle?

WARSHAW: I mean, again, I would just say that I think the, that working-class voters seem to be transitioning back to Republicans. I mean, I think we, what we thought we were seeing over the last decade was sort of a long-term secular trend of working-class voters becoming more Republican, and educational realignment leading these sort of suburbanites to become more Democratic.

And it's also a little weird. The other thing that's a little surprising, and it's, I think is correlated to that, is earlier we talked about New York state a little bit. It seems like we're seeing important differences state by state in the election. So the whole state is seeing a turn against Republicans, but that very, seems to be varying a lot by state. And we'll have to see how the final results look. I mean, it's all based on pre-election polls. But I think it's interesting that the, the popularity of the governors seems to have a big effect on down ballot. And I think many would have thought that in this era of nationalized elections, that would have sort of gone away, that having a popular Democrat in Pennsylvania, and maybe a less popular Democratic governor in New York, you know, that wouldn't really matter for congressional races or down-ballot races. But at least based on polls, it seems to still matter.

TENPAS: Yeah. And then one of our viewers wanted to know the difference between gerrymandering and dummy mandering. Can you explain dummy mandering?

WARSHAW: Well, dummy mandering is when you draw a map that leaves you worse off than before, and that's not what any of these maps this cycle are. Like, these maps, again, were optimized for a close national environment. And I think in that close national environment, they all would have - Republicans would have won in all the maps that they gerrymandered. Democrats would have done well in California. And in fact, even in this midterm environment, I think in every state that they gerrymandered in, Republicans are gonna do better on the new map than they would have on the old map.

So none of these are classic dummy manders that we saw in some of the, you know, I don't know, in the 1990s or something, where Democrats tried to draw Southern maps a little too, a little too closely to hold onto power, and it ended up backfiring against them. I think most prominently West Virginia is often talked about as an example of that. But that's not what we're seeing this cycle.

TENPAS: Yeah. And Bill, one question, real quick question get to get back to you is any thoughts about the reliability of polls? I mean, we've had prior elections where the polls have been off. What are you expecting this term or this election cycle? Have things changed technologically? Like, should we be more confident in the results, or should we always be a little bit wary of their results?

GALSTON: I've talked to a fair number of professional pollsters in recent months, and they will all say that polling has gotten significantly more difficult over time. You know, they're working much harder to try to lean against some of the kinks in the machinery that have, in fact led to inaccuracies.

Although, at the national level, the national presidential polls are the most accurate. And as you start bumping down the ladder, they get less so for all sorts of reasons including the fact that the organizations that do national polls have very significant resources, pools of resources, that they can pour into the kinds of selection processes of their sample to try to minimize selection bias in the sample in the way that less well-resourced organizations simply can't match.

And in midterms, that shows up in a lot of local polls and state polls, where you can just see, reading the methodologies of the polls, that they haven't been able to dot the I's and cross the T's. And so you always have to take those polls with a bigger dose of caution than when you have national polling organizations doing them with all their powers of correction.

TENPAS: Yes. Yeah. Okay. Thank you. And Chris, I wanted to ask you... I'm sorry Erin, I wanted to ask you, what worries you most about these forthcoming midterm elections? And just to get back to the polling question a bit, you mentioned that sometimes you have access to candidate pollsters, polls as well. Is there something that maybe those candidate pollsters do that's a little bit more, that allows for more accuracy or predictability?

COVEY: The candidates' pollsters want to get paid at the end of the day, and so the quality of those polls, I think, you know, varies widely. But usually I would say we know who the good Democratic pollsters are, we know who the good Republican pollsters are. And we know kind of what their house effects, their biases lean as well.

Like there are some Democratic pollsters that are quite a bit more conservative in their assessment of the electorate than others. And so I think the important thing that we do is we're just looking at all of it as much as possible, and so we can compare the polls to each other, and we can also compare the polls over the course of time.

You know, when a Democratic campaign or a Republican campaign is releasing a poll to the public, they're doing that because they have an ulterior motive, usually to raise money. And so they may be you know, releasing the most positive poll that they have seen in the course of the campaign, but we don't know what the trend lines are, how that polling has changed over time. And so what we are able to do is look at just a much wider swath of polling for that reason.

And yes, again, I think there are a lot of partisan pollsters who do great work. And, you know, obviously they are working for a party, so we - you have to keep that in mind, but it doesn't mean that, you know, in terms of their methodology or in terms of the polls themselves, they are more or less accurate than some of the public nonpartisan polls.

And then to Bill's point, with the House polling, there is not a ton of, you know, reliable polling that is out there. There are a lot of new polling firms that pop up. Feels like every month there's a new pollster that we have to look into. And you know, some of these pollsters are doing good work, but some of them have much more questionable methodology.

And so being able to take each poll as it comes and put it into a average is what I generally suggest people do when they're watching these polls. Obviously, there were some pollsters that have great reputations that you can trust when they release a poll. Okay, this is probably a decent sense of what is, what the electorate feels at this point, but you know, a lot of these polls, I would not put too much worth in them individually.

I would look at how it, how they have how they compare to the other polls over time.

TENPAS: Okay, thank you. And Chris, I want to get to you and ask you this question. A viewer has a question about kind of, you know, the notion that elections matter, and after these elections on November 3rd, there will likely be a change in the House and the Senate composition.

What does that mean in terms of policy? There've been questions about its impact on Canadian trade tariffs questions about tech policy. If you could just pick a few of those areas and talk about what we might expect if indeed Democrats control the House and the Senate, or if they just control the House.

WARSHAW: Well, I think the two, or the, it'd be the three most high-profile things it'll affect. The first is that we're likely to see lots of oversight hearings in either - in whichever chamber or both chambers the Democrats win that will do investigations into all kinds of things happening in the administration. And this is, you know, this isn't that unusual. This happens every time the opposing party wins control of Congress when there's a president of the other party in charge. But I think we'll see that.

Second thing I think we'll see is that the, if Democrats win control of the Senate, that'll have big implications for judicial confirmations, and you know, if, obviously, if there's a Supreme Court nomination, it would have big implications for that. I think what you shouldn't expect to see, though, is big, lots of big legislation. You know, we're not gonna see Democrats... I mean, they might pass messaging bills, I don't know. But we're not gonna have lots of bills getting signed by the president because in the current polarized era we're in, right, the president's not gonna sign a lot of Democratic bills.

But I think that, you know, the, the important thing to think about is the alternative, that if Republicans keep control of Congress, there will be legislation over the next few years, two years, that wouldn't happen if Democrats win control. So that's sort of the gap in the - that's an important gap in policy consequences, the gap between what Republicans would do if they had control and sort of the lack of legislation that we'll see in a divided Congress.

TENPAS: Yeah. Thank you. And Bill, I wanna ask you the same question, but keeping in mind that this is also a lame duck presidency. So, you know, this are, these are the final two years of the Trump administration. That, in addition to the fact that there could be Democratic majorities. What do you see in your crystal ball?

GALSTON: Hello. Ha Good question because there is a debate now quiet within the Democratic Party, you know, as to how a new majority in either the House or the Senate you know, should proceed. And there are some people within the Democratic Party who think that it's really important to try once again to impeach and convict the president of the United States of high crimes and misdemeanors.

My own belief is that would be a mistake, but there's a faction within the party who thinks that would be the appropriate response to, you know, the regaining of partial or total control in the Congress. There are others who say, "No, the most important thing to do is to tee up substantive bills that will give the American people some idea of what the Democratic Party would do under the leadership of a Democratic president."

Chris referred to those as messaging bills, and that is technically true because very few analysts would expect bills of that sort, even if they got through the House and the Senate, to be signed by the president. But that's still serious business because it sends a big signal as to what the party's priorities would be.

And there, there clearly will be a focus on tariffs, on the distribution of tax cuts. I mean, I can think of a million bills that Democrats would try to get through if they had the power to do it, sending a signal to the electorate that they are determined not only to undo what Democrats believe is the damage of the first two years of the second Trump term, but also, you know, to build on past Democratic successes and try to advance a different economic agenda.

TENPAS: Okay. And this is switching gears a bit, but Erin, I wanted to ask you the idea about spending, and you talked about those outside groups spending a great deal of money. My understanding is there not... it's not necessarily a sharp correlation between victory and expenditure, so sometimes the candidate who spends less money wins. And what does your data show, or what do you have to say about that?

COVEY: Yeah, I think there's a big debate about the value of spending. My feeling about it is that I think in the lower-profile races it makes a bigger difference. Like we see in primaries for example, when a super PAC comes in and drops \$3 million on a primary that otherwise hasn't seen that much spending, that does make a really big impact.

I think particularly with the statewide races, the Senate races, you hit a point where you start to hit diminishing returns with the money. Or in some cases if you're a candidate who is incredibly wealthy and has spent a ton of money, and voters are aware of that, that in and of itself can backfire.

I think that in these reach House races though, the places where Democrats, you know, maybe think they have a shot at flipping these seats in this sort of environment, whether or not a super PAC spends a couple million dollars could make a difference at the end of the day. And so I think, yeah, the races that are lower profile, it can make the biggest splash, but you do start to hit a point where it matters less as voters' views of the candidates become more baked in.

And I also think, you know, it's important to remember people are voting earlier than ever now. A lot of people have started voting already since over the past month. And so how big of a difference the spending can make you know, remains to be seen.

TENPAS: Okay. And Chris, any concerns-

WARSHAW: One thing, one thing I would just add on that is I've done a lot of research on TV ads, and what I've found is that the largest total effect that we should see in a race is probably a point or two.

And most of the time TV ads, even in a saturation environment like Texas you know, probably will move the needle, like, half a point toward whichever party has the advantage. So ads do help, as Erin said, more in down-ballot races and more in primaries than in high-ticket, top-of-the-ticket general elections. But they tend to have relatively small effects.

TENPAS: Okay, and one more question for you, Chris. Any concerns about election administration on November 3rd, or any types of obstruction in January, or anything of that nature?

WARSHAW: I have lots of concerns, but I think that overall I expect there to be a hopefully a smooth election, and I have a lot of faith in our democracy.

TENPAS: Okay. Bill, same question to you.

GALSTON: I agree with Chris, and I've spent a lot of time arguing with some of my more concerned friends about the probability that the worst case will actually occur. I think it's substantially lower than some of the more worried people think it is.

TENPAS: And Erin, what about you?

COVEY: I agree with both Bill and Chris on this point. I think that there are a lot of local and state level election administrators who are preparing for all possibilities. But when you talk to them I don't think that there is, there should be any reason for widespread concern about voter suppression or anything of that nature.

But, you know, I think all of these a lot of secretary of states, secretaries of state are encouraging voters to vote early and bank their votes if they are concerned about, for example, federal agents at the polls. But we can't anticipate these things until they happen, and I think that a lot of it tends to be a little bit overblown.

TENPAS: Okay. Well, thank you so much to each of you, Bill, and to Chris, and to Erin. Really interesting insights and research. I also wanna thank the audience for joining us this morning. We hope you enjoyed the program. And thank you to all of the Brookings staff who produced this webinar. Enjoy your afternoon. Thank you.