

## ISOJ 2020: Day 1

### *Covering electoral campaigns in the digital age: Challenges of the 2020 presidential election in the U.S.*

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Chair: [Evan Smith](#), co-founder and CEO, Texas Tribune

- [Laura Barrón-López](#), national political reporter, Politico
  - [Katie Glueck](#), national politics reporter, The New York Times
  - [Alexi McCammond](#), political reporter, Axios
  - [David Weigel](#), national political correspondent, The Washington Post
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**Mallary Tenore** Hi, everyone, and welcome as we come together for the first entirely online ISOJ. We're excited to have you here. I'm Mallary Tenore, associate director of the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas at the Moody College of Communication at the University of Texas at Austin.

Before we get started, I'd like to share a few housekeeping notes with you. I want to let you know that all of the panels, all the keynotes and the workshops will be interpreted to Spanish. So if you'd like to join and watch in Spanish, click interpretation in the meeting options below and select the Spanish channel. I should also mention that we are live streaming on YouTube, in English and in Spanish, so that you can tune in to the live stream at any point if you have any technical issues here on Zoom, and we'll be posting links to those YouTube channels in the Zoom chat.

Now, if you do have any technical issues, you can please feel free to contact our tech helpline via WhatsApp or text, and that number is 817-526-0179. Again, 817-526-0179.

Lastly, please remember to follow and use the hashtag #ISOJ2020 to stay connected with the conference on social media, and we encourage you to share questions in the chat feature of Zoom. We'll do our best to address those at the end of the conversation.

So with that said, I would like to introduce this amazing conversation we're about to have about covering electoral campaigns in the digital age with a focus on the presidential elections in the U.S. in 2020. So we'll hear from Evan Smith of the Texas Tribune, Laura Barrón-López of Politico, Katie Glueck of The New York Times, Alexi McCammond of Axios, and Dave Weigel from The Washington Post. So without further ado, I would now like to turn it over to Evan Smith.

**Evan Smith** Hi, everybody. Good afternoon or whatever time it is where you're watching this. Good morning. Good afternoon. Good evening. Good to be with you. As Mallary said, I'm Evan Smith. I'm the CEO of the Texas Tribune. Welcome. I'm so pleased to be participating in ISOJ once again. Thanks for asking always, Rosenthal. In a moment, I'll be leading a discussion, as Mallary said, about covering the 2020 campaign with four of my favorite political reporters. We'll be talking for about 55 minutes, and then we'll take your questions.

But before we begin, a little context by way of setup. This is the weirdest effing campaign ever. To paraphrase the president at his press conference, tropiest, "no one's seen

anything like it before." It's weird for candidates generally as their attempts to get airtime are necessarily being thwarted in a momentous election year by three once-in-a-generation crisis playing out at the same moment. Public health, emergency, economic collapse, reckoning over race. It's weird for incumbents specifically because regardless of their role or responsibility, as office holders at all levels, they're the ones on the hook for a response when in most places things haven't gone well. It's weird for challengers specifically because so much for their best laid plans organizing, and doorknocking, and GOTV, anything conventional hatched in the before as ground game, and strategy and tactics.

It's weird for voters who don't get to meet and really get to hear from the candidates they're being asked to choose among. And in the absence of expanded mail in voting, cough, cough, Texas cough, cough have been forced to literally put their lives on the line to cast a ballot.

And it's weird for the press who must cover a firehose of news, even as they're severely constrained in many ways in their ability to do their jobs. But do them they must. The future of our democracy rides on it. Our session today addressed that last point: How weird it is for the press at the moment, and what it's like to be on the campaign trail virtual during all of this.

We are joined, as you heard, by four NexGen pros. Laura Barrón-López, national political reporter for Politico. Katie Glueck, national politics reporter at The New York Times. Alexi McCammond, politics reporter at Axios. And finally, Dave Weigel, national political correspondent for The Washington Post and author of The Trailer, Washington Post's thrice weekly newsletter about the campaign. Good to be with all of you guys. Sorry not to be with you in person. Hopefully that'll happen at some point in our lifetimes soon.

**Alexi McCammond** Thanks for having us, Evan.

**Evan Smith** Good to see you guys.

Katie, let me start with you. Obviously, this is not the campaign you thought you were going to cover. How have you adjusted to the change? Give us a real personal sense of what you thought it was going to be like, and what it's actually been like.

**Katie Glueck** Well, thanks, Evan. Great to be here. Great to be here with all of you even virtually. My experience as a Biden campaign beat reporter was that we were sort of on the go on Super Tuesday, and we had been on a really intense swing in a couple of the days leading up to Super Tuesday from Alabama to Virginia to Texas to California. And then we came back after that Super Tuesday. Then there was a little bit more campaigning in places like Michigan, and then everything just came to a stop. And so I think you used a good term. It's weird. It's weird for all the different constituencies that you mentioned and perhaps as well for the candidate who has been seeking to adjust for quite a big part of this quarantine by campaigning from home and now is slowly trying to get back out there, about once a week so far, to be a little bit more in public. And the press is, of course, trying to figure out how do you cover that? How do you cover more broadly what's happening in the country when there are so many logistical considerations and health considerations as well?

**Alexi McCammond** I think maybe we lost Evan. If he's gone, I can pick up from there. I think it's been a really weird personal experience, Katie, to your point, because of how

much we were traveling and how that became our new norm. And I feel like we just all kind of got...

**Evan Smith** Alexi, you know, look, it's easy to think that we've been at this work-from-home thing, and nobody traveling and everything disrupted.

**Laura Barrón-López** I think we lost him again. Alexi?

**Alexi McCammond** OK, well, I'm just going to join in on this train, talking about it personally again, because we traveled so much in the beginning, and I feel like none of us were even, I can only speak for myself, were thinking about just that experience of literally living out of a suitcase. I mean, I know I saw all of you on the road all the time, and you're going nonstop, always thinking about the next place you're going to go. I would think about, OK, I have one night in my apartment in D.C., maybe two nights, and that felt like a luxury. And then it's so weird to go from that to the opposite, the extreme end of the scale where we're stuck at home trying to figure out not just how we build sources, which is a unique experience when everything is virtual, when you can't meet people face to face, but talking to voters, which is something that I love doing that I felt like helped my analysis, whether it was in writing or on TV, because you got a real sense of how people actually felt, which helped me better understand the polls, and the numbers, and sort of like the hypotheticals that we were talking about, especially with things that consumed D.C., that then you get out there and it's kind of like nobody's actually talking about this, or if they are talking about it, they're talking about it differently than maybe we were or we heard in D.C.

So I really miss doing that, but luckily, one thing that we're doing, we did those Obama-Trump focus group throughout the upper Midwest. Now, those are all virtual on Zoom, so like I still get to hear from voters that way. But obviously, it's so different than getting to talk to them at a rally or a campaign stop.

**Evan Smith** Well, you know, technology doesn't always work. Yeah. Technology doesn't always work, but where it does work, you can possibly substitute it for the real thing. Let me ask Laura Barrón-López the same thing. What were you expecting from this campaign, and how has the change actually affected the work that you do in the broadest sense?

**Laura Barrón-López** Right. I mean, like Katie and Alexi, I was on the road nonstop from January until the first quarantine started to hit, which was about the first few weeks of March. So it was definitely whiplash, a hard adjustment. And I also kind of took up a second beat. So I cover race and demographics on the election trail, covered Black and Latino voters. And I very much miss those interactions with voters. But I also have now expanded my beat a bit to cover coronavirus and the disproportionate impact of coronavirus on Black, Latino, and Native American populations. So that's been a bit of an adjustment for me, is also bringing in a bit of a new beat for myself, and I've enjoyed it. It's an important story to be covering. But at the same time, I'm still covering the Black Lives Matter movements, and unfortunately, we're just not able to do the same type of reporting that we typically would be, where it's flying on planes or going to these events the way we would like to.

**Evan Smith** Laura, have you been traveling really at all over the last couple months? Are you doing this entirely remotely, or are you able to travel at all in these last couple of months?

**Laura Barrón-López** I haven't been traveling at all. We have sent a few reporters here and there. One reporter per event to either the Biden rally that was held in Oklahoma. Or not the Biden. Sorry. The Trump rally that was held in Oklahoma. The Biden events in Pennsylvania. But again, it's only one reporter going to these events. I would like to in the coming months hopefully get out there on the road to talk to some voters, probably just to places that I can drive to. I don't feel comfortable getting on a plane just yet.

**Evan Smith** Before I go to Dave Weigel, Alexi and Katie, very quickly, have either of you really left your homes that much over the last couple of months? How much travel have you been in? Alexi first and then Katie.

**Alexi McCammond** I haven't traveled at all, just like Laura. I think I'm going to Milwaukee for the convention, and that'll be the first time I'm traveling for work.

**Evan Smith** Katie, how much work have you done outside of your place on the Biden campaign trail in the last couple of months?

**Katie Glueck** I actually have started slowly to travel. I did go to President Trump's rally in Tulsa. I didn't go in. A colleague of mine did, but I was there sort of on the ground standing outside trying to talk to voters and attendees there. And we actually got back the week before last from doing a campaign reporting trip in the suburbs of Charlotte. So it's my first time flying since March. Definitely an adventure.

**Evan Smith** But those are the exceptions though, right? That's the exception. Mostly you're just basically sheltering in place?

**Katie Glueck** I think some of us, I think, are hoping to start moving to getting out there a little bit more. But yes, absolutely that the default is to quarantine, you know, like the rest of the country.

**Evan Smith** Weigel, this is meant to be a compliment to you. I read The Trailer every time it comes out, and I really can't tell whether you're frozen in place or whether you're traveling. You've done a pretty good job of faking somebody who's operating as a regular political reporter in your newsletter.

**David Weigel** Well, I've traveled a bit. Like Katie, I went to the Tulsa rally. I've been on a few planes. I went to Ohio for their primary because that was the first state that kind of restarted the machine after the pandemic. I went to Texas to cover the Texas Democrat's convention, actually, which, Evan, as you just saw, the Republicans holding theirs is that Democrats are trying to prove if you have enough prep, and you admit in advance you're not going to get a huge crowd there, that you can scale it down, but get your message out, raise money. And I went to New York and back for the primaries that, as we are meeting here, are still not finished counting. And it was a month since I went up there, literally a month since voters in New York turned their ballots.

So I've done a little bit, and what I've been missing is some of the gut check you get from just leaving the internet to go talk to people. And it was very helpful. I wouldn't say that I saw every twist in the 2020 race coming, but you didn't find yourself getting wrapped up in the same Twitter narratives or the same kind of circle of thinking that people might all have if they're all following the campaign very closely. I mean, the thing I always liked is beyond talking to voters at the rallies, is seeing what was penetrating, what was on local news, what was in the local paper, and you don't get the same thing. So I try to simulate that,

frankly, a lot with phone calls. But a lot was just checking out what local news is focused on, talking to county party chairs. But I am missing the random interactions with voters that I think, as unscientific as they are, are super helpful. So I've had to find other ways to convey the totality of the campaign that don't involve meeting people in public.

I mean, you're seeing that now with people trying to gather petition signatures or register people to vote. One story I'd probably be writing right now is about the Democrats ground game, the Republican ground game. Democrats ground game at the moment, even in primaries, is mostly phone calls, voter contacts, but nothing door to door. So it's just changed everything.

**Evan Smith** Well, I want to come back to that question of the ground game, but let me stay, Dave, for a second with the voters. I mean, the problem is sort of two ways. One is that reporters aren't really going on the road by and large. We've heard about a couple of exceptions here, but that's really the exception to this. But the second thing is voters aren't particularly interested in being in those mass gatherings either. A couple of people reference the Trump rally in Tulsa. Voters don't want to be with you right now or politicians any more than you want to be really with them. I mean, you might like to in the ideal sense, but this is not really a moment for you all to be together. Right. So you're going to have to improvise.

**David Weigel** I think so, and I think that was a signal that some people, no one on this call, but I think some people missed in speculating on the Republican side, speculating that the president was going to crowd Joe Biden out of the news. He was going to have a rally and prove how his base is still active and out there. And Biden's isn't. And it was pretty much a debacle. A debacle that led to the demotion of Trump's campaign manager because, yeah, the people are not super comfortable going out there. I'm 38, and I don't think anyone on this call is in their hundreds, but you really haven't seen this level of campaign where somebody is just not out there stumping for the vote or they're just getting the message out on their own schedule once a week. I don't know, arguably, 1952. Maybe you have to go back earlier than that.

But accepting that reality that just people are not going to be going to political events and how do they operate, I had to do that early on. It's been helpful because people have been voting. You saw that again in Texas. Not to just keep pandering to Texas, but you saw huge runoff turnout from people mailing in their absentee ballots and doing a little bit in person. By far the highest turnout for Texas Democrats in runoff history, and that was not from candidates going to diners to meet them. That was people kind of self teaching and the parties doing this very quiet behind the scenes outreach.

**Alexi McCammond** And can I pick up on something he said, Evan?

**Evan Smith** Please.

**Alexi McCammond** So I think Dave's point is interesting. We look at how President Trump is kind of like not forcing but enticing people to come out in public at a time when we aren't really certain about the direction in which coronavirus is moving, and all the facts behind that, and how to keep yourself safe. And we saw that people weren't really comfortable coming out in large numbers that they expected. And then on the flip side, you see Biden, to Dave's point about this idea between Trump crowding him out and Biden staying home, Biden and his campaign are really trying to just meet voters where they are online, which in some ways feels like the most basic concept when we all pre-coronavirus were talking

about digital tools that campaigns were using and digital strategies and how important that was. Now, it seems like the most basic, rudimentary thing for a campaign to be doing, but it's something that's helping Biden.

And, you know, the interesting thing, too, about trying to figure out how to think about how voters are feeling at this moment when you're not meeting them in person, I find myself looking a lot at like the Q&A section on Zooms when the campaign holds Zoom meeting to see what kind of questions and themes are emerging and the things that voters are concerned about that they're asking about. What are the poll report questions say? It's really about those questions that people are asking, less so even than what Biden is saying half the time, because he's not always making that much news. It's really about like what are people asking that can signal to us what they care about? Is it all about VP or is it about immigration and health care?

**Evan Smith** Yeah. Katie, when you were outside the Trump rally in Tulsa, you said you talk to voters. You were one of the Times reporters who made the trip. Did you find that voters were receptive to talking to you? And was it a different experience of talking to voters than you're used to pre-pandemic?

**Katie Glueck** Certainly, I did feel very different compared to pre-pandemic. You know, this was in June. There were a lot of sort of divergence of viewpoints around whether or not to wear a mask. That was, of course, a big flashpoint in the rally and more broadly. I mean there were a lot more people in line who were not wearing masks. I was wearing a mask. I think, Dave, I saw you there. I know that you were as well. And, you know, sort of navigating how. It was my first experience being out there trying to interview people while I was wearing a mask. Many of those folks were not wearing masks. So, you know, that did add just a new layer of something I hadn't experienced before.

When I was in the suburbs of Charlotte a couple of weeks ago, I was trying to interview voters in a grocery store parking lots. A lot of voters there were wearing masks and were sort of especially attuned, just because it was such a hot spot in terms of the coronavirus, were especially attuned to the dynamics surrounding that pandemic. Whereas a lot of the voters who chose to come to the event in Tulsa were not so motivated by those concerns around the virus. That was part of why those who did show up were willing to go into that that big arena where there had been a lot of concerns that that could be a spreader event.

So, yes, it certainly injected all kinds of new dynamics in terms of talking to people in a pandemic. And, you know, it was a reminder of how different people of different parts of the country are feeling it, and the degree of urgency there is certainly different.

**Evan Smith** Laura, Alexi reference the Q&A sections of the Zoom appearances, and we're trying to basically fill in what would otherwise be in-person contact with voters with something that you access online. Really, you have a void that's been created by the lack of all this activity, haven't you? You really can't see candidates. You really can't see voters. But you've still got to report. I just wonder if strategically, what has that meant for you? How do you put the narrative together? How do you figure out what the narrative is in that environment?

**Laura Barrón-López** I guess just leaning on all of my sources constantly, which is not that much different than what I would do, I guess, pre-COVID. But constantly having as many conversations as possible, especially with grassroots organizers or people that can put a check on the D.C. bubble and other pollsters that are trying to keep a pulse on different

electorates. So people who focus on polling Latinos and those who focus on polling Black voters, and just making sure that I'm getting as big of a picture as possible.

Also, like Alexi, I definitely do pay attention to the Q&A section of Zooms. Not just Biden's, but also Zoom panels held by other elected. Zoom panels held by the BLM movement. All of those to try to really just see what people are asking about. And I think one of the issues that a campaign like Biden is having is one like his campaign even criticized the lack of coverage that they were getting just on cable news. So like the inability to have some of his speeches or some of his virtual comments just make it out there into the public domain beyond what they're pushing out themselves. And that, I think, is because so much of the public focus right now is on COVID, is on being able to make that next paycheck. We have the relief running out at the end of this month. There could be mass evictions. I think there's so many things occupying the brains of the voter right now that is making it not just difficult for Biden, but also difficult for Trump, to break through in the way that he would like to.

**Evan Smith** Dave, you talked about about Twitter and spending a lot of time on Twitter and the value of not spending time on Twitter. It occurs to me that in the absence of a lot of the traditional reporting channels, the media becomes that much more important as both a gathering place for this conversation and also a source. But as we know, social media is frequently, in cases like this weaponized to spread disinformation and misinformation. And that has been a particular problem, it seems to me, in this campaign. And that's before we even get to Bitcoin scams. How do you factor that in, or how do you account for that? How do you account for the disproportionate role that social media plays when everything else is basically leveled to nothing? In particular the misinformation problem.

**David Weigel** Yeah, I can't say that I've mastered it, really. I do try to do a lot of searches on Facebook, on Twitter, on TikTok. On the things best known. A little bit of Nextdoor occasionally, but that's not super fruitful. I think when I did the most of this was when there were a few protests, kind of blossomed for a couple of weeks and then faded by people demanding states and their restrictions around COVID. These reopen protests. And I mostly reported that by seeing how much stuff was trending, looking at doing a search on Twitter for media, because often people upload their photos, upload their video. And it felt a little bit like having to report on something in a foreign country because I was so limited behind my desk. But it wasn't hard, and people were pretty willing to talk. People, once the rally was over or while they're streaming the rally, were happy to have a discussion. It's stuff that wouldn't have been possible 20 years ago.

And when it comes to the actual false stories, just as a sideline, I enjoy kind of finding those. I sometimes will notice that something has picked up in one stream of social media or the other that is baseless or is a manipulated video that happened a couple of days ago, where there was a video from the 80s of Biden joking with a Black singer at an event. And somebody had manipulated the video to make it look like he was introducing a blackface singer. Didn't take a lot of time to find that, but I kind of just traced where it was coming from. And I wasn't in the mindset of creating a huge debunking. I just was looking at what was out there beyond and below the normal political conversation. That part is not that different than it would have been, I think, in a non-pandemic situation. I mean in the Trump campaign, a campaign that is often running attacks on Democrats or on Joe Biden, that when you run them through the fact checker or you check the context of the quote, it's not totally accurate anyway. And this campaign in normal circumstances, would have lots of Facebook ads that imply something that when we fact check it, it's false. I'm not sure if that's spreading faster than it would have without the pandemic. People are at home a bit

more, but there also are more antibodies, whether they're effective or not, that are finding the pure fake stuff online.

**Laura Barrón-López** Yeah, if I could just add something to what Dave said. It's not scientific. It's very anecdotal. But I do almost feel like the fact that we are all home constantly, everyone, right, is lending to a much more online culture and is lending to people almost falling prey faster to conspiracy theories. And I've just been surprised by the number of friends in other states who have texted me asking me to explain the pandemic videos or different conspiracy videos related to the virus. Is this accurate? Is it not accurate? And it's been insanely frustrating and a new development for me as a reporter. And so I am concerned that that is only going to continue as we head toward the election for the reasons that Dave laid out, which is that already there was going to be rampant disinformation and misinformation, some coming from the Trump campaign itself.

**Alexi McCammond** A few weeks ago, Evan, we did a virtual focus group, and we asked them to tell us some of the craziest thing that they had seen or heard about COVID-19 online. And I was shocked by the things that these people had seen, not only because I hadn't seen them, but just because people were putting this out there. Luckily these voters recognized that it was all fake information, but it was things like, oh, if you snort a line of cocaine a day, you will protect yourself from getting COVID-19. If you wash your hands with vodka, you'll prevent getting COVID-19. And I was like, the fact that I am not even seeing this is a good thing, I guess, but it's bad that that is even getting out there. Luckily, these folks knew. I mean, those are probably some of the more absurd examples.

But, you know, to everyone else's point, when these things are rampant, they become more nuanced and like detailed. And I think that those things are harder for people to pick up on, especially as it relates to the coronavirus, because there's so much changing and happening that's real every day that kind of confuses people on top of the misinformation.

**Evan Smith** Alexi, I'm wondering if, you know, again, I'm thinking back to this idea that in the absence of on-the-ground reporting where you're meeting candidates or you're talking to voters, if it becomes easier for politicians to think that they can get away with saying things that are not true or putting out misinformation, and if it's harder off the campaign trail to do the kind of fact checking? I mean, I guess in some ways, as Laura said, this online culture. We're all sitting around. We're all Daniel Dale at this point, right? We're all spending all of our time just instantly fact checking the president every single second or other candidates. But has this environment created a window for people to think they can get away with more since you're not constantly one or two steps from them on the trail?

**Alexi McCammond** Well, I think, I don't know. I haven't seen a lot of misinformation from elected officials myself, but I will say that I think like the bad actors who exist online already, to your point, know that people are spending a lot more time online and know that things are moving very quickly. And so I think for that reason, it's a lot easier to sort of like pump the internet with all these different things. I will say, though, on the other hand, of course, like there are so many voters who are just not online at all in the way that we're online. So they're not even hearing or seeing these things. But what they are hearing and seeing, I think kind of getting to your point, Evan, in a different way, is President Trump during those daily coronavirus briefings that now they're considering bringing back as a way to kind of resurrect.

**Evan Smith** Which we hear is going to back as of five o'clock today, right? The president said this morning.



**Alexi McCammond** Right. Exactly. And so I think that's kind of an interesting change too. Like President Trump is doing this new style of delivering information to people that is not online at a time when most people are online. People are seeing that more. And he's throwing out any number of theories and ways to handle this kind of fear point in the way that we see bad actors doing online. So I think that that's kind of interesting to see what he's doing with those.

**Evan Smith** Katie Glueck, the thing about those coronavirus briefings was that in part they were the president putting out a narrative about the virus and in part it was an opportunity for him to spar with the media, which he loves to do and which ultimately helps him with his base. This is one of the things about this campaign that is different maybe from previous campaigns, is the degree to which more and more and more the media is blamed for everything. The media gets attacked for everything. Right. How is that factored in the way you've thought about this coverage, Katie?

**Katie Glueck** For certainly any number of presidential election cycles, the media has always been, for some candidates, in their view, a convenient political foil. So, you know, I think that that is something that we've seen for a long time. But no doubt that in this moment in particular, the way that the president, the way that some politicians do talk about the media, you talk about "enemy of the people," that kind of language, that is different from what we have seen in previous presidential campaigns, at least in a number of them going back several years.

You know, I think ultimately, looking at it from a reporter's perspective, you know, all that we can do is really be doing our best to ensure that we are providing information that is as fair and as bullet proof and as contextualized as possible. And certainly it's not just on the right where you see a lot of criticism of the media. Certainly there's lots of people on the left who have all kinds of concerns with how a particularly story is covered. And so certainly it's a pretty fraught time. And a lot of different people for a lot of different reasons see reason to seize on the media as a foil. And so I think no doubt more scrutiny perhaps on what the media does than perhaps at any other time before.

But you know there's only so much that we can control in terms of how we respond to that. So I think fairness, and context, and as much accuracy and kind of the fullest picture possible for, you know, in service, and we hope to the benefit and trust of the readers.

**Evan Smith** I appreciate, Katie, that you said it's not just coming from the right, but it's also coming from the left. That your organization, The New York Times, and Dave's organization, the Washington Post, two very large establishment news organizations, it is often the left that believe they're not holding the president and Republicans as accountable as you ought to. It's as often that's the case as it is people attacking you from the right for being too liberal, is it not?

**Katie Glueck** Sure. I mean, there is certainly, as we discussed, the president and a lot of his allies on the right have long been critical of the sort of mainstream news media. But certainly on the left, there's a lot of people who, you know, there's this sort of debate, whether I guess the degree to which the media should be adversarial toward the president or toward other elected officials, and certainly it's absolutely our job to have that adversarial approach. But, you know, at the same time that there are some and there's some debates unfolding about to what extent the media is considered as part of the

opposition party and, you know, sort of mainstream reporters don't perhaps see ourselves in that role. So that leads to tensions, I think, on both sides.

**Evan Smith** Dave, I'm thinking about last week when the president finally wore a mask and Ashley Parker dared to tweet something that was to the president saying, "I'm going to say I think he looks pretty good in that mask" or something to that effect, and she was slammed by people on the left for daring to say in that tweet that the president maybe looked OK in the mask, that maybe he shouldn't have waited so long to put one on. What a world we're living in in terms of how you guys are viewed by both the left and the right.

**David Weigel** I think it's very subjective. I think there has been an uptick in that. But I'd seen that attitude rising for years. I mean, there's an attitude among liberal readers of the news that the media was unfair to Hillary Clinton, that it tried to create an equivalence between whatever she did wrong and whatever Trump did wrong in 2016. So you do get a lot of hair-trigger responses like that. I guess I think in terms of covering the campaign, the president does give you a bunch of stuff every week, and it's usually very different. It might contradict something he said before or did before. You saw it with the masks where members of his campaign team were tweeting not just that he looked good, but the election was effectively over, and he hasn't really been wearing one since then. Whereas the Biden campaign has been a lot more plodding and a lot more, I think, week to week on its messaging, and it has given you less to react to, at least from the candidate's own words. But it's been generally good for Biden.

So I guess I phase out a lot of the criticism I'll see on Twitter if I think it's just kind of about the way a sentence is phrased or disagreement with a tweet that doesn't agree with a page or a paragraph six of an article. That's always going to be there. In terms of how to process the campaign itself, I think it's slowed everything down. It's been to the disadvantage of a candidate who can throw up a new story for a new news cycle every couple hours, if that. That might be saying it too slowly.

I think what I pay more attention to is how much is he tossing out there versus how consistent is Biden doing it? And it involves a little bit less attention to Twitter critics going back to what ads are they buying? What is the actual messaging they're throwing into these states beyond whatever people who are reading this think the message is.

**Evan Smith** Hey, Laura, because you said that you are now back on the coronavirus campaign trail as much as the actual political campaign, I want to ask you about one other aspect of this how the media has been attacked. I've noticed in Texas that every time we at the Texas Tribune publish new data about coronavirus cases or hospitalizations, we're attacked simply for pushing a narrative that somehow by reporting the data that people say this is panic porn. "You and the media are trying to politicize the coronavirus." Are you hearing that as you go out into communities of color and report on this stuff alongside the political stuff that somehow the media is a bad actor for doing its job in reporting on the data?

**Laura Barrón-López** I mean, I get the occasional Twitter troll who will say that by reporting on the disproportionate impact of the virus on Black people, on Latinos across the country, that somehow I am trying to divide the country and that I'm trying to divide voters and people by race and ethnicity. But the populations that are being impacted, who I talk to on a weekly basis now, whether it's Black people and health directors in Georgia, Latinos getting hit really hard in Arizona, Native American populations hit hard in Arizona or in California, they feel as though the story isn't out there enough and that the media in

trying to paint it as, "oh, the virus shifted to red states," that somehow they aren't still being impacted when we do know that across the board, they are disproportionately of this disease.

So I wouldn't say I pay attention to those critics. They definitely are sent my way, but I think it's our job. And as you guys at the Tribune are doing an excellent job in making sure that that data is out there. Because across the board, the country, and the federal government, and states, it's widely known that they have failed. I mean, epidemiologists I've spoken to have said that data collection has failed across the board, and we still are missing some 50% or more of data broken down by race or ethnicity in a number of states. And one thing an epidemiologist just said to me, and that's the last thing I'll say on this, is that she, this Harvard epidemiologist, is actually very frustrated that we don't even have data by age adjustment for gender, which would show a lot more clearly the impact by gender, by sex, on different age groups. And there's just a lot of gaps across the board still.

**Evan Smith** Well, in fact, what we know about the incidence of the coronavirus by race, we know in part because Katie's newspaper, The New York Times, sued the CDC to get that data, right. It took suing the government to get that data. And now, of course, as we know, the data at the CDC is over to the Department of Health and Human Services, and it may even be harder for us to know what we need to know about this stuff.

Alexi, let me bring you back into the conversation and ask you a kind of mundane, a kind of down the center of the fairway question. What do you think the Trump strategy and what do you think the Biden strategy is as we sit here in July 2020? Did I come back? Can you hear me now?

**Alexi McCammond** Yes, you're back now.

**Evan Smith** I was asking you kind of a mundane question. What do you think the Biden and the Trump strategies are now for prosecuting the balance of this campaign as we sit here in July 2020? Given everything that's happened, given everything that's going on around us, kind of shorthand, what do you think the strategies are for these two campaigns?

**Alexi McCammond** Well, the shorthand for President Trump, I mean, full disclosure, I do not cover him full time. I covered Biden full time. But what is clear in the last few weeks, months alone, is that he's reverting to really trying to capitalize on these culture wars. We know that he was a candidate in 2016 who thrived on stoking these culture wars and taking advantage of them. Now we're seeing how he's doing the same thing in the aftermath of George Floyd's killing in Minneapolis. I mean, it's like the migrant caravan of 2018 midterm elections. Now he's doing everything he can to root for Confederate statues and monuments to maintain their place, not just in American history, but in the country in 2020 and beyond. And, you know, I think that's because he is really trying to play to that base of voters that he's always cared about.

But what is clear now that we're seeing in polling, and focus groups, anecdotally otherwise, is that he's losing support from critical voters. Those who are 65 plus in large part because of his handling of the coronavirus. Those are obviously the folks who are most affected. But they made up a quarter of the electorate in 2016, and they're really reliable voters, usually. Obviously, this year is different, so who knows who's reliable and who's not. He's also losing women. You know, earlier we were talking about not breaking down data by

age, by gender. Sixty-five plus women are really unhappy with Trump, even more so than sixty-five plus men. And there are a lot more sixty five plus women than there are men just because of life mortality rates.

So I think that we're seeing Trump really not trying to expand his electorate and hang on to that group of voters to get him across the finish line again.

What we're seeing with Joe Biden is kind of completely the opposite to my point earlier about how he's meeting voters where they are online. They're doing it in ways that, you know, sometimes seem kitschy or kind of whatever, like Instagram live with high schoolers, for example, with different surrogates from their campaign, or Instagram lives or surrogates from their campaigns and celebrities from different TV shows. They're trying whatever they can because the barrier to entry is so much lower since everything is online to expand their electorate. And that's not just with different factions of Democratic voters. It's with Republican voters and independents, too.

I mean, today there's reporting out, and I have this confirmed, that John Kasich and other Republicans are being asked to speak at the Democratic convention on behalf of Joe Biden, which just speaks to our times. We've seen how different Republican groups are coming out in opposition to President Trump. It's one thing for Republicans to say, "OK, I don't like Trump. I'm going to vote for a different Republican." It's a completely different thing for Republicans to leave Trump and move over to Biden's campaign. And it's really fascinating.

**Evan Smith** And to actively speak at the convention. You know, put ad campaigns, whether it's the Lincoln Project or Republicans Against Trump, we have a very different environment. Absolutely. Katie, Alexi, talked to the politics of this. Let me ask you about the process of this. You know, you hear the Trump campaign complaining sometimes that Joe Biden is spending this entire election season in his basement. That's not literally true. But on the other hand, to the degree that Joe Biden hasn't been out and as visible as he might be under a normal circumstance, it hasn't seemed to really hurt him. Katie?

**Katie Glueck** No, not at all. And we'll see what the pace looks like headed into the fall.

**Evan Smith** Do we have Katie Glueck?

**Katie Glueck** Yes. Can you hear me? OK, great.

So, yes, you're absolutely right, it has not hurt him at all. And I would love to echo Alexi in terms of where we're seeing some of the voters shift, especially with that sixty five plus, those senior voters, typically much more conservative. And the fact that those voters are in play for Joe Biden this time around is really significant, and I think underscores the challenge that President Trump faces headed into this. But, you know, certainly as much as the Trump campaign says that Joe Biden is stuck in his basement, you're right, it's not literally true. He is kind of getting out there about once a week, doing these very careful events, typically giving a speech on policy.

You know, and certainly I've heard from Democrats for a long time who would like to see him out there more. We do get, you know, this has abated some given where the polls are, but, you know, certainly at the beginning of the summer and in late spring were quite anxious about the extent to which Biden was being overshadowed by Trump. Now, in talking with Democrats, you hear a lot of people who are of the mind that in their view

Trump is causing a lot of destruction to himself and so don't get in the way of that. And then there's others who say that Biden ultimately is going to need to be out there in a more active way. And it's my understanding from people around him that certainly they would like to do that and are looking at the best ways to do that.

But, you know, in the meantime, absolutely, they're trying to connect online, as Alexi said. And, you know, I think that we may well see a tale of two ground games. It's very interesting in 2016, Donald Trump had no ground game, and it didn't matter. And this time around, he's kind of the organized one with the field offices in place. And we'll see whether Biden tries to match that at some point or if they turn their focus entirely online and try not to get in the way when to the extent to which Trump's causing damage to himself.

**Evan Smith** Dave Weigel, you know, as we look ahead for the next couple of months, we actually don't know what the next couple of months are going to be. I mean, let's say the not so quiet part out loud that the uncertainty about the world means that these campaigns are really having to plan their strategy from week to week. The Biden campaign doesn't know any more than we do whether they're going to be able to do something like a ground game at any point between now and November. What we're seeing now, this online strategy, Dave, this may be it for both the Trump and the Biden campaigns for the balance of the cycle, right?

**David Weigel** Yeah. And I guess I'd separate into three buckets. One of them is, will he do rallies? Biden has already suggested he might not have a traditional rally for the rest of the campaign. I mean, we've gone more than half the period between him clinching the nomination and the election. We've gone without him having a rally. He might not have one. And frankly, based on the results of the primaries, it may reveal that most voters don't go to rallies. I mean, Bernie Sanders got bigger crowds. Bernie Sanders got destroyed once it became a two-man race. So is that an issue for Biden? They're missing out on some data, but they were never going to run the kind of campaign that Sanders was, which depended on contacting as many new voters as possible, in-person, knocking on as many doors as possible, et cetera.

So the other two things are something that happened kind of quietly at the very start of the pandemic was states changing their laws to allow more absentee voting. Something is happening technically quietly, but with a lot of money behind it, are the lawsuits. It's worth watching that, and it's not a thing that normally we've had to watch very closely, for what kind of electorate there will be. There are going to be some states where they're telling people you have to do this, this, and this to fill out your absentee ballot. There are some where they're going to tell them, "Absentee ballots coming your way. Just just fill it in this way." If you look at what happened in New York, I'll mention again, a lot of people thought they voted, and they screwed it up because they hadn't cast absentee ballots before.

And that's the third part of this. I mean, beyond suing and passing laws so that the electorate can turn out in untraditional ways, that's what I think the GOTV is going to be based on in large part. And there's an asymmetry because the Trump campaign has said that it's put people back out there knocking on doors in traditional style of campaigning and Democrats have not. The caveat, and the Wisconsin election was a little bit weird this year because the Democratic primary is the same day as the race for a judicial slot, but Democrats didn't do traditional door-to-door targeting. They did tons and tons of phone calls telling people how to turn in absentee ballots, and they did very well in that election. That's not a preview of everything that's going to come. But what they already kind of demoed is what would it look like if people are not allowed to vote, or I guess if they're

scared to show up and vote, and the answer for them in that election was you can manage. So I think that's the GOTV we have to look for, which is not something we've ever looked at.

In some way it'll be good. I mean, a lot of door-to-door canvassing can be a little bit Potemkin. You can go out with a campaign, see them knock on 20 doors. They get a couple yeses. And that didn't tell you a whole lot about what's actually happening. So finding what is actually happening is going to be tricky, but it involves keeping all those things in perspective. Like this is not going to be a campaign that's going to have a big Biden rally and that means you got ten thousand new voters. That's not how it's going to work.

**Evan Smith** Yeah, this is definitely very, very different. Laura, back to your wearing your Biden hat right now. Alexi said, well, the president wants to run the old playbook in terms of the culture war. He also wants to run the old playbook in terms of defining his opponent with nicknames and in ways that are much more familiar to 2016. We've had corrupt Biden. We've had Beijing Biden. We've had Sleepy Joe. None of that stuff seems to be sticking. None of that stuff seems to be working this time. That is one big difference in terms of this campaign versus last. The strategy that worked in 2016 doesn't seem, at least to this point, to be working now.

**Laura Barrón-López** Right. I think what it speaks to is that what happened in 2016, which was that Bernie Sanders also was misguided in thinking that the vote that he got in 2016 was pro-Bernie as opposed to potentially anti-Clinton. And I think Trump was able to very much define Clinton because of the animosity that was held toward her by a number of people across the electorate. And that helped to do the work for him as opposed to Biden, who is much harder to define. There isn't as much just natural anger or hostility toward Biden as there was toward Clinton. And so all of those attempts to define him so far, whether, like you said, it's to China or just defining him as sleepy and not cognitively there or able to be the president, isn't working. We saw this past weekend his exchange on Fox News with Chris Wallace. If anything, it potentially hurt Trump to get into this back and forth about, "I took a cognitive test, and the doctor said that I passed with flying colors. And Biden would not be able to pass that." Again and again, all of these attempts by his campaign to attack Biden, to attack his children. We've seen the RNC Rapid Response tweet out and then get lambasted for including tweets that have Biden's kids when they were very little and using those to attack him.

All of those attempts haven't stuck, and if anything, it maybe is helping Biden. Some recent polling just this past week from Monmouth had Biden up by double digits in Pennsylvania. So polling has consistently over the last few months has just shown Biden rising and rising even in battleground states against Trump.

**Evan Smith** Katie, Laura's mention of the polls makes me want to ask you about all this talk that, "Well, the polls were wrong in 2016." That's the line that you'll hear, whether that's actually the case or not. "Well, the polls were wrong in 2016. So even though the polls say what they say right now, don't believe it. There's still plenty of time. These are all fake polls." Maybe 2020 is just different from 2016. Maybe the idea of somehow trying to look at this campaign through the lens of the last campaign is a problem for those who are doing it. It's not Clinton. This election cycle is not that election cycle. You can't really use that as a frame of reference. What do you think about that?

**Katie Glueck** Sure, there are a lot of people on both sides of the aisle who seem almost stuck in the 2016 framework and are doing so much of the election through the lens of what happened that year. And no doubt that Joe Biden and Hillary Clinton are two very different candidates. And it's also clear that the people who headed into the 2016 election not entirely sure whether Trump would govern in the same way that he campaigned, they now have the answer to that. And whether they like what they see or don't like what they see is something, that there still are three months left, you know, I think fair to say that still remains to be seen.

But, you know, to build on something that that Laura was saying, you know, Trump in the last couple of weeks in particular, has taken such a scattershot approach to Biden. We just did a story on this last week that in the Philadelphia media market, for example, his campaign, at least as of last week, is running both ads that paint him as too tough on crime and ads that paint him as too soft on crime, which really underscored their challenge in deciding how it is that they want to define him.

But at the same time, there are a lot of Democrats who are aware that, you know, Trump, at least in 2016, and maybe it's right to use that mindset and maybe it isn't, but at least then he was very successful in ultimately defining Hillary Clinton in their view. And so, you know, there's a lot of Democrats out there who are worried about that. They are in constant talks with the Biden campaign. Some of Biden's top advisers have set up these phone calls with key congressional delegations in battleground states, conversations that can sort of serve as an early warning system if any of these attacks are breaking through in a way that some of these Democratic members feel is problematic. So, you know, they say that they're taking it very seriously, even though it does look like, at least as of now, Trump's struggling to define him.

**Alexi McCammond** Evan, on 2016 being different than 2020. I mean, it's not just, I think, that Biden is so different from Hillary Clinton, and I think that can be explored literally every day until the election to remind people of that. But I think what's also interesting is that in 2016, it was Trump versus Hillary Clinton. In 2020, it's Trump versus himself. Yes, he's running against Joe Biden, and I think the Biden campaign is trying to figure out how much of a referendum on Trump this election will actually be to voters. But I think all signs are pointing to it being exactly that, which, of course, is what history has shown us to. I mean, we saw sort of the backlash against President Trump in the 2018 midterms, which benefited Democrats greatly, obviously in the House, but in other down ballot, local elections, too. And I think that's what's really difficult for Trump. He's trying to define Biden. That's not working. But what's also not working or what's a lot harder for Trump is running against himself.

It's a lot easier for him to run against an opponent who he has turned into a complete caricature. He can't do that with Biden. And not only can he not do that, but he's now stuck clearly running against himself and his policy record, which he, of course, didn't have when he was running in 2016.

**Evan Smith** And Dave Weigel, you know, this is interesting. I think Alexi's point is exactly right. You know, who else is running against Trump? All the Republican Senate candidates in the swing states, right? I mean, just as the president, this is really a referendum on the president. Those Senate races are also a referendum on the president. The Arizona race, the Colorado race, the Montana race, the main race, the North Carolina race. Places we didn't think we were going to be talking about in July 2020. Those are all effectively referendums on the president as well, aren't they, Dave Weigel?

**David Weigel** Like, oh, yeah, they're more vulnerable because of the president's unpopularity, which comes from both the pandemic and, I think, the response to George Floyd protests, and we saw in 2016, it is very hard when he's on the ballot to distance yourself from him. The politics of today are not like the politics of 1996, where you could run as a Republican and say, "Well Bob Dole is going to lose, and here's my agenda." You can't have a break with Trump. He ends up alienating some of your voters.

**Evan Smith** And, Dave, he won't let them break from him. That's the other part. He won't allow it.

**David Weigel** Right. That too. But the other aspect of this that's really telling about what happened in this campaign, is very few, the last I counted less than six ads, have been run by Republicans running for anything, for House or Senate, that attacked Joe Biden. The only exceptions have been if they kind of fold him in to an attack they're making on a Democrat about China or something like that, they tend to attack Bernie Sanders, Nancy Pelosi. And Nancy Pelosi, who will be speaker of the House again. But he has not been an easy subject to attack.

The other thing that I think gets left out of the Trump-world narrative in 2016 is they admitted at the time they got very lucky because of mid-July. This is when James Comey four years ago issued his report on Hillary Clinton and said he wasn't going to charge her, but but but that drove her numbers down. In October, WikiLeaks had emails released every day that hurt Hillary Clinton. Comey emerged at the end of the election. So there are a lot of weeks where now Biden is able to have an event, and the story is "Biden unveils plan." The story for Hillary for the same event would have been "facing questions on emails, Clinton tries to pivot to plan." And that dynamic is just it's there, so we're not noticing it every single day. I think that's been very important, especially in Trump's inability to read Biden and make him scary for people. It's not just his record. It's not just all the other things we could go into. It's not just gender. It's just that even when they bring up something like Hunter Biden's business record, or Ukraine, or anything like that, it has not connected in the same way. And that really has mattered, and it's not something that Trump can control.

**Laura Barrón-López** Evan, did you cut out? Am I the only one that he cut out for?

**David Weigel** I didn't hear all of it.

**Alexi McCammond** Yeah, I didn't hear either.

**Laura Barrón-López** We've lost Evan again. OK, you're muted, Evan.

**Evan Smith** I apologize.

So the question was, will the vice presidential choice matter, yes or no? Each of you very quickly? Laura, Dave, Katie, Alexi, will it matter?

**Laura Barrón-López** No, I don't think so.

**Evan Smith** Dave, will it matter?



**David Weigel** I think it will because we'll see if Trump's able to make the VP nominee scary to people, which he hasn't been able to with Biden.

**Evan Smith** Katie, will the vice president matter?

**Katie Glueck** I think I think it'll be a campaign issue. How significant it is I'm not willing to commit yet, but we'll be talking about it.

**Evan Smith** Alexi?

**Alexi McCammond** Yes, to Dave's point. Yes.

**Evan Smith** It will matter? To Dave's point, right?

**Alexi McCammond** Yeah. Yeah, I think Dave's point is right.

**Evan Smith** OK, and then the second question is, will we have a winner on election night, Alexi? Will we know who the person the president is on election night?

**Alexi McCammond** On election night, no.

**Katie Glueck** Gosh, I don't know. It depends so much on what happens with the different methods of voting, and modes of voting, and how much is absentees. I don't know.

**Evan Smith** Dave?

**David Weigel** I think we'll know who's winning. I mean, I can imagine a situation where Pennsylvania's counted everything but Philly and it's tied, then we'll know Biden won Pennsylvania, for example. I think we'll have trends that tell us where it's going on election night.

**Evan Smith** Right. Laura? This is a nightmare for all of us who care about this stuff. We're going to go through election night, go to bed, and not know who's going to win.

**Laura Barrón-López** I'm going to agree with what Dave said. We will have some idea of where it's headed. Although I don't expect that we'll have all the votes tallied by any means whatsoever.

**Evan Smith** So we'll know where it's trending, but we won't have a conclusive answer, you think?

**Laura Barrón-López** Right.

**Evan Smith** Right. OK, so let's now go to audience questions. We've had a bunch while we've been talking today. Let me go ahead and try to get in as many as we can between now and the next 15 or 18 minutes or so.

Here is a question. As far as it goes of coverage of elections in other countries, in this case of the 2020 U.S. election, what would you say are the main issues that foreign journalists must cover or must pay attention to? Laura Barrón-López, let me start with you. What are the main issues that foreign journalists who are trying to cover this election should be following in this campaign?

**Laura Barrón-López** Well, I think we lightly touched on it, but disinformation and misinformation is one of the biggest things that I think needs to be covered. Potential influence, continued influence from Russia or potentially other foreign actors is something. Biden just said that he started getting intel briefings again and that he's very concerned about interference from Russia.

**Evan Smith** Right. Dave Weigel, are we going to be talking about significantly over the next couple of months, or are we going to forget that that ever happened?

**David Weigel** I missed that. The audio cut out exactly at the noun you used. Will we stop talking about what?

**Evan Smith** Are we going to be talking about Russia over the next four months, or are we going to forget that that ever happened in the last campaign?

**David Weigel** So it's a semi-complicated answer, casting no aspersions whatsoever on the people who reported the Russia controversy, meddling in the 2016 election. All that reporting was legitimate. All the stories were legitimate. But I think until impeachment, that was a story that a lot of liberals paid very close attention to because they thought maybe there is kind of a lever we're going to find, and you pull it, and Trump disappears. I think that's flipped, and we now have some Republicans waiting for the indictments, or the investigation, or the announcement that's going to knock Biden out or knock him down. The craziest manifestation of the QAnon stuff. There's going to be something. There's going to be something at some point.

So I think in the campaign narrative, a little bit, but probably on the sidelines. In the sense of meddling with the election, that is a constant story, and it's also depressing to think about. But the issue is so hardened and partisan at this point that a big chunk of the country is just not going to believe it if told in either direction that there's been meddling that's influenced the vote.

I think an election could have a very definitive result. Let's say it looks like it does in the polling today. There would still be a very large number of people who say, "There must have been some foreign interference. There must have been millions of illegal votes." So we'll hear about it. I think if you're foreign journalists looking at it, sticking to facts, seeing what is being done from state to state to guard against this, that's the way to go at it.

But look in the 2016 campaign, Hillary Clinton dealt with this. Plenty of evidence, intelligence organizations and agencies, I should say, saying that this was a foreign hack with the intent of helping Donald Trump, hurting Hillary Clinton. And a lot of people who are not just in the Trump side, but on the left saying what a crazy excuse. That's a conspiracy theory. There has to be something else. So any premise that is, can we get 100% of Americans to believe the objective facts that we've reported, that's going to fall apart, and we're never going to get most people to believe in the facts of a case.

**Evan Smith** OK, let me go ahead with another question here. Alexi, let me direct this one to you. This is a communications PhD candidate writing from Finland who notes that his country has a 34 year old Prime Minister, Sanna Marin and that he says we love her. What is your expert opinion on why younger U.S. presidential candidates cannot compete with the seniors? These are the two oldest candidates running for president we've ever had in

history, right? In the same major party candidates. What happened to the younger candidates in this race?

**Alexi McCammond** I mean, that is one of the more fascinating trends of this primary cycle, even just thinking about how we in the media covered the diversity of the Democratic primary field. There were so many women, people of color, to your point and the questioners point, younger people who, you know, obviously Mayor Pete was somebody who surprised a lot of people in large part because of his age, but also because of his relative experience to wanting to run for the White House.

But I think that Donald Trump has changed a lot of things for a lot of people and polling throughout the primary, in spite of like the shiny objects that we all kind of chase at different points, polling throughout the primaries showed that Democratic primary voters prioritize a candidate's ability to beat President Trump in November more than anything else. And that stayed consistent throughout the primary in polling, but what also stayed consistent was Biden's relatively high approval rating, even when he had gaffes or moments on the debate stage when he was being criticized by his opponents, he still remained relatively steady. Where others would have a bump and then go back to where they were, or they would just go down and down until they eventually dropped out.

I think that a lot of voters throughout this primary, ones I talked to, especially, said that they wanted a sense of stability. They wanted to move past the chaos that they felt was kind of swirling around President Trump and his administration, and Biden looked like a safe space for them to kind of, you know, find a political home in, in the President Trump era. And that was something that we saw hold consistent throughout the primary. I think that's why.

I think that maybe in a different year, in a different lifetime, if Trump wasn't elected or if we were past Trump for many years, then maybe people would feel differently. But when they're thinking about how to move past this moment, they found that a septuagenarian like Joe Biden was really what made them feel comfortable and stable and able to move past Trump and Trumpism.

**Evan Smith** You know, Katie Glueck, thinking back to 2018, it's not just age. The three constituencies that were so significant in Texas and in other places with Democrats having a better cycle were young people, women, and people of color. You had some younger people in this race. You had women in this race. You had people of color in this race. And instead we got an old white guy as the Democratic nominee. What happened? I mean, it's kind of amazing to think about.

**Katie Glueck** You know, ultimately, for a lot of voters in the Democratic primary, ultimately this time around, representation was not the number one issue. You know, Joe Biden, I think it's fair to say became the Democratic nominee in enormous part due to really strong support from older African-American voters who, you know, with whom he had a very strong connection for a wide variety of reasons that we covered pretty extensively.

But, you know, ultimately, bigger picture, and there's a lot of reasons that go into this, but, you know, as you know, in part, as I think Alexi was saying, for a lot of Democratic primary voters this time around, the overriding question was, who do we think can beat Donald Trump? And for a whole lot of reasons, they saw Joe Biden as the stable choice. The choice data, as we were talking about earlier. You know, that perhaps it would be difficult to make him as scary to more moderate voters. So a lot of voters looked at it that way.

And then, you know, there's all kinds of other dynamics. The more progressive vote was certainly fractured for a while. But, you know, ultimately, we should note, of course, that Biden did terribly in the Iowa caucuses, and he did terribly in the primary. But ultimately, when he came out of South Carolina and headed into Super Tuesday with some more momentum, there were so many voters who were comfortable enough with him and so ready to move into the general election that we saw people get on board in really big numbers. They just wanted to end the primary and start taking the fight to Trump.

**Evan Smith** Laura, you know, Matthew Dowd, who was famously an apostate strategist for George W. Bush during the Bush campaigns. He ran for a while some of the Bush efforts, and then he sort of broke with Bush. He said a couple of years ago, heading into this campaign cycle, that the Democrats slogan should be Make America Boring Again. Maybe in the end, the most important thing for the Democrats in this race was not age. It was not gender. It was not race. But it was somehow completely turning the page from the chaos presidency. Maybe the simplest explanation is the correct explanation.

**Laura Barrón-López** Yeah, I mean, the press got hit a bit for talking a lot about electability, but that was also because voters were talking about concerns about electability and talking about fear that if anyone who was a really big target for Trump would mean that Democrats lost the election. And so these primary voters were very worried.

When I was in South Carolina talking to older Black voters, they were effusive. A number of them, I was surprised, were effusive in their praise for Warren. They liked her policies. But at the end of the day, they said, "Look, I'm going to vote for Biden. Because she's a woman, and look at what happened to Clinton. Or because her policies just aren't going to fly. Congress is not going to work with her." And Pelosi, Nancy Pelosi. You know, I think Congress, yes, there's also a lot of septuagenarians in Congress who have the mantle, and I think their influence in terms of also influencing the Democratic primary voter by saying, "look, I'm not going to be willing to pass Medicare For All, or I'm not going to be willing to bring that to the floor" kind of also had some influence in some of these voters when they were heading to the polls and deciding who ultimately could work with Congress, could get things done to reverse what Trump did, and get elected.

**Evan Smith** OK, Dave Weigel, let me ask you a question. Jay Rosen, who is often at this conference in person, the NYU professor, has asked a question to us on the line here, and I'm going to direct it to you, although obviously I think it could be directed to anybody here. What are you trying to accomplish with your campaign coverage?

**David Weigel** It's a good question. I approach everything as what does this country think, and what does it want? Which it's hard to answer until people are running around asking to become president. And I think, to be honest, some of the story I'm telling is a little more inside baseball, a little more scorecard, who is winning various races. But each of those races have been telling us about what people are accepting, what they're interested in at the moment.

In New York, we saw a number of candidates become the first Black member of Congress from a district that had never elected anyone but white candidates. We've seen just the Republicans and recruiting down-ballot candidates try to change, if not what they're running on, at least who their running. So I think capturing a lot of the currents going on the country through the campaign. And there are weeks or days when the campaign is not

the most important story. Many days it's not the most important story, I don't think. The campaign scanned exactly with the protests that were happening. But I think generally that's the story I'm trying to tell.

But I keep in mind that not everything influences the campaigning. That's been a problem for Republicans is some days they're kind of trying to make the story about some cultural war, some TV show, and not everything runs through the stream of the campaign. But voter opinion, American opinion, for example, people who 10 years ago would have said there isn't systemic racism, saying now there is. I think covering the campaign and looking for evidence of that is something I've been trying to do.

**Evan Smith** Katie, is your job to tell people what happened, or to tell people what's important in this campaign?

**Katie Glueck** You know, I think big picture, I would say the job is to help people to sort of explain what is happening to voters and to help, even more importantly, understand why it's happening. And so for me at least, I think we are at just such an extraordinary moment in this country, and in our history, and in our political history, and I want to do the best job possible to understand what is motivating voters in this country and understand what's motivating and driving the two main candidates in this race, and who they are, and do my best to sort of shed some light on the character at play.

**Evan Smith** Laura, here's a question that relates to the visit of President Lopez Obrador to the White House earlier this month. The questioner, Cesar, is noting that the visit of the Mexican president did not have much of an impact on the U.S. media. But in Mexico, the meeting was interpreted as Trump's attempt or an attempt, one of probably a couple, to revive his campaign and get some support from Mexican-Americans. Do you think this visit had or will have any impact on the campaign? And generally speaking, do you think that we're thinking beyond our borders in this cycle? If the Polish president, or the Mexican president, or anything else that materializes on the president's schedule happens between now and November, is there the potential for any of that stuff to affect the outcome of this race?

**Laura Barrón-López** I'm skeptical of it impacting this race. I do not think that the Mexican president's visit to the White House influenced Latino or Mexican-American voters that much in any which way.

**Evan Smith** Well, it barely registered for any voters, it seems like. We've almost forgotten the fact that he was even here. Right? It was just a couple of days ago.

**Laura Barrón-López** Right. And I think part of it is because coronavirus is running rampant in this country right now. Almost all states are in the red zone. And the president has tried to hold other events, has tried to direct the public's view toward something else. He tried to do that with Tulsa. And he tried to do that in New Hampshire, and then they realized that maybe they weren't going to get the crowd size that they had expected, and then canceled it due to weather. You know, it ended up being clear skies. So realizing that they aren't able to just recreate reality and focus on very different topics that the president wants to focus on.

**Evan Smith** In a normal campaign, foreign policy or visits by foreign leaders might actually have a role in the campaign. But at the moment, it's basically all coronavirus all the time. Right, no matter what else we try to talk about.

**Laura Barrón-López** There are things happening domestically that I'm not sure the average voter is going to be paying attention to the president's meetings with foreign presidents. Typically, it might. I think Biden early on definitely wanted to make this an aspect of his campaign. He hit over and over again that he was the only candidate in the Democratic primary who could, on day one, rebuild those relationships with foreign allies. So he's wanted to. We may hear more of that from him.

But again, the topics on the minds of the American electorate aren't really focused on relationships with allies. It's focused on what's happening with their paycheck, what's happening with their health care, coronavirus, and now the massive unrest around police violence against African-Americans across the country.

**Evan Smith** Right. We've got about two minutes left. Let me ask a question to you, Alexi, and then the last question is a great Weigel-y kind of question for Dave as we head out. So, Alexi, what's going to happen on election night or not long after if the president loses, but he is unwilling to accept defeat? We had a little bit of a sense of that actually over the weekend in the interview with Chris Wallace, did we not, where the president would not say with certainty that he would accept the outcome of the election. So what happens then?

**Alexi McCammond** Yeah, right. I mean, he said to Chris Wallace, like, "we will see." That's the Trump line. "It's coming in two weeks, or we will see what happens." I mean, like to be fair, I think he's right. We will see what happens. Obviously, if it works out in his favor, he's going to be happy and not question the results of the election. I think to Weigel's point earlier. I think it was Weigel. Someone was saying that Russian interference could really change the election either way. So it's really curious how both Biden and Trump will talk about the results.

But I mean, that's the thing. Trump was asked if he's a gracious loser, and he even said, "we will see." We know, though, that President Trump loves winning. He's not going to go out quietly. He doesn't let people leave his administration or his White House quietly because he's consistently thinking about settling personal scores. If we know anything to be true about President Trump and his pattern of behavior is that he wants to settle personal scores. And this is the biggest personal score that he would have to settle of his lifetime. Of course, if he loses, there's just no chance that he goes out quietly. He's not a quiet person. Whether or not that means he challenges the integrity of the results, we will see. It really remains to be seen.

**Evan Smith** Can you hear me?

**David Weigel** It's being cut out. I couldn't hear the last thing.

**Evan Smith** Can you hear me now? OK, here's the last question for you, Dave. OK, what about Kanye?

**David Weigel** Now, why is that the question for me? So it's a moving target. How to sum it up? So to start with, I think because Trump won, there is an attitude out there that I find a little lazy, which is that means people want famous people to be president now. I don't think that's true at all. Donald Trump was one of the most famous wealthy people in the world for about two decades, almost three, before he got The Apprentice. So his image was of a successful businessman who then had a TV show, not the other way around. The

Kanye West image is of a very eccentric celebrity. He has not done the work so far to get on ballots in states where it takes some elbow grease to get on them. In Texas, for example, he will not be on the ballot. In Michigan, he's not going to be on. He had a rally in South Carolina that didn't have much of a message beyond relitigating Harriet Tubman's record, and it did not help him get on the ballot there.

So we've got a couple of weeks where he might try to get on some ballots, but I wonder if there has been an overrating of how much people want a distraction like that. I don't think Joe Biden would be up by eight to 12 points if people wanted flash. They are worried about a government not responding to a crisis competently. And the Kanye West brand is more about fun shoes, eccentricity, weird music videos. People are finding some resistance if they say this means this guy should be president.

**Evan Smith** Dave, you're giving a serious answer to a question about Kanye. A thoughtful, long, serious answer. I thought it would be an opportunity for a one liner on the way out here, but it actually ended up being a walk.

**David Weigel** In the spirit of Kanye, I'm never going to stop talking. You have to cut me off.

**Evan Smith** OK, good. Well, you guys, we have to stop right there. I want to thank so much Laura Barrón-López, Katy Glueck, Alexi McCammond, David Weigel for their time and their patience over the last 75 minutes. It was so great to be with all of you. Thank you, Rosental, for having us. I'm now going to hand it back over to Mallery for some housekeeping on the way out the door.

**Mallery Tenore** Great, thank you so much to each of you for sharing your insights with us. I certainly learned a lot, and I loved hearing your firsthand experiences of what it's been like on the campaign trail, especially in the midst of the pandemic and all of the challenges that that presents, including rampant misinformation and disinformation. So thank you again, Evan, Laura, Katie, Alexi and David for being with us.

To everyone else joining us today, thank you once again for attending the first-ever fully online ISOJ, and I'd like to remind you that our next and last panel of the day will be about how to reinvent sustainable models to make local journalism survive and thrive in the digital age. It starts at 4:00 p.m. central, and you don't want to miss it. We will also be continuing the ISOJ festivities this evening with our happy hour at 5:30 p.m. central, and you can visit ISOJ to register. Once you do, you will receive instructions via email about how to access the happy hour. So thank you all again, and we look forward to seeing you back here very soon as ISOJ 2020 continues.