



Virtual Event | The Future of Politics in an Evolving Information Ecosystem

TRANSCRIPT

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- Roshan Patel, *Partner, 50 State*
- Josh Holmes, *President and Founding Partner, Cavalry*
- Jon Lerner, *Senior Fellow, Hudson Institute*
- Peter Rough, *Senior Fellow, Hudson Institute*

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A video of the event is available: <https://www.hudson.org/events/1924-virtual-event-the-future-of-politics-in-an-evolving-information-ecosystem-22021>

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Peter Rough:

Welcome to Hudson Institute. Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Peter Rough. I'm a senior fellow here, focusing and working primarily on American Foreign policy with a focus on Europe and also the Middle Eastern Security Architecture. As that job description suggests, Hudson is a policy organization not a political consultancy, so today's event is a little bit unique. But, I think any veteran policy analyst who's achieved any success over the years would agree with me that, policy isn't made in a vacuum. You have to transmit ideas out to the public through various channels and so, I think understanding the media landscape is very important. And beyond that, understanding the public and its preferences is important to build a constituency, so ideas don't die an ugly death. So politics too, I think is important to understand as a policy organization. So, here I am with a slight detour into the world of politics and media, and I couldn't be more thrilled to be joined by three really fantastic panelists today.

Jon Lerner is a senior fellow at Hudson Institute. Before that, he was Deputy Ambassador to The United Nations when Nikki Haley was leading our mission at Turtle Bay. Jon has played an important role in a lot of foreign policy debates over the years including recently in the Middle East Peace Process, where he had a part to play in the diplomacy that eventually yielded or culminated in the Abraham Accords. But of course, Jon is a man of many talents and wears many hats and he's well-known as a political strategist here in Washington. He has led many top tier congressional, senate and gubernatorial races to victory over the years. And, we're thrilled to have him here today as one of our guests. A fellow Minnesotan just like Jon Lerner, Josh Holmes is also with us today. Josh is the founder of Cavalry, a political and issue management consulting firm in the greater DC area.

Josh is best known as a close confidant of the Republican Leader of the Senate, Mitch McConnell. Just a few years ago in 2014, I remember watching election night returns come in and there is Senator Mitch McConnell up on stage declaring victory and praising his campaign manager, Josh Holmes, for pitching a perfect game. So, it's great to have Josh with us here today. And last but certainly not least, Roshan Patel, who's a partner at 50 State, a consulting firm in Alexandria, Virginia, actually Washington DC area. I'm not sure if it's headquartered in Alexandria, you'll have to clean that up later Roshan. What's interesting about 50 State is it's really focused on the state capitals as its name implies. And so, it works with a bevy of clients to achieve their goals in the States themselves.

Roshan has a lot of experience on the side. In the little free time he has, he devotes himself to the Lieutenant Governor's Democratic Association as Executive Director. He's had senior roles at the DSCC, which is the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, the DGA, which is the Democratic Governors Association, and a bunch of other campaigns. He is one of the best networked, nicest and savviest democratic party operative in Washington. And so, I'm really thrilled that all three of you found the time to spend with us. And for our audience, which isn't always getting such an insight to look under the hood of politics and media, and tends to spend a little bit more time on the narrow policy focus. So, why don't we start with a look at the media landscape. With that, I'll start with you, Jon, and just open up with a blank canvas asking you to give us your view on what's really changed in the media world over the last several years. What really characterizes the media landscape today?

Jon Lerner:

Well, thanks Peter. Good to be with you today. It depends on how far you want to go back. When I started doing political campaigns in the early 1990s, there was no internet to speak of. There was certainly no social media. CNN had not yet gone fully communist. Fox News didn't exist at all. The networks were still big players in political conversation and literally, the only thing that conservatives had was Rush Limbaugh, may he rest in peace. That's a different landscape than what you see today. The biggest difference I think today is that there's so much more diffusion in mediums, and messages,

and sources of information for voters. It's also more participatory for voters through social media and other means that allow regular people to participate in politics, certainly a faster moving dynamic for campaigns and people in the political process.

But, it's not different in a lot of big ways as well. It was true then, it's still true now, that the bulk of campaign expenditures and efforts are spent on media in one form or another, either paid advertising or the management of press messaging. And, it's still true. It was true then, it's still true now, that the broadly speaking the majority of the media outlets have a more liberal lean and the bias of the media is still as it was in the 90s. And still today, is a cross that conservatives have to bear. If anything, the landscape is better for conservatives today than it was before, because there are more outlets that are conservative friendly than there used to be, although the intensity of the criticism is probably greater now than it was before. That's my initial take on the question.

Peter Rough:

Josh, I didn't mention this in the intro, but you and I worked together 15, 16 years ago now, at the RNC and from the Republican point of view Bloodbath Cycle of 2006, which we both somehow survived. But, back then there was a new cycle. It felt like in the morning when you woke up, the most important 30 minutes were The Today Show and I think in 2007, Morning Joe came online. A lot of assignment editors and reporters, I don't know if they worked out while watching these shows, or just the first thing they saw as they got ready in the morning, it seemed to shape a lot of the day or set the stage for the day. And by the time the evening news came around, there really wasn't a lot of messaging going on because the day had been set. Is there still a rhythm to the day? Is there still a media environment like that where you would describe something of a new cycle, or do you not see that? And beyond that, anything you see building off from Jon's remarks about changes in media, we'll be happy to hear.

Josh Holmes:

Yeah, it's a really great point. I think we start with the basis that the internet really democratized media very, very quickly, much quicker than politics at large, or like saw last week with Game Stop getting into finance. And, what it did is like Jon was talking about, it really bifurcated a lot of different mainstream media outlets into scattershot. And, people began to operate in the choose-your-news type culture. To the extent that there's a cadence to things Pete like there used to be, it's for itself which is really interesting to me. Media centers of New York, Washington, to a certain extent, LA, they perform for themselves basically. They're reading each other, they're putting together what they think are significant stories, and they're setting their own cadence for what their own media narrative is.

But in that, they're also building out their own audience, which is broad because it's a country of 300 million and a world of news consumers beyond that, but really narrow in terms of the constituency that they're actually reaching and talking to. So, you can see these huge disconnects that we've had in the last five or 10 years about issues that seem to be melting the public discourse. In terms of your news media, they have absolutely no following whatsoever across the country. There was a ton of this that happened during the Trump years, that's only getting worse. The disconnect is even going further because the audience plays to itself, and the social media component to this is it's a self-reinforcing type mechanism. If you are continuing to generate headlines and generate news that all falls within certain silos, your followers are going to be the people who most likely agree with that.

If you ever break out of that silo, it's a real problem. You're basically shouted down on social media which is what Jon was referring to, in that this inherent bias begins to exist. It's always existed at some level, I agree. It's always existed at some level by nature of where these media organizations actually live and socialize, but it's become much worse as the internet has become more pervasive in terms of its distribution of its content. So yeah, I think people worry now today, a lot about misinformation or

inability to correct facts, to actually provide facts, and our inability to stop this information. And, the reality is we don't have a handle on that yet. It doesn't go through the same filters. In many respects, getting beyond the media refilter from my perspective has been a good thing, but there are problems, significant problems. When you see the admin of conspiracy theories and the like, that began to threaten core tenants of our democracy.

Peter Rough:

Roshan, how should we think about the modern media?

Roshan Patel:

I don't think I could let that fastball that Jon threw down totally go, regarding the local media. When Joe Scarborough had Trump on the show during the 2016 election, nobody was penning them as liberals. But, I do think Josh is right. To Jon's point, the competition's out there. Folks are no longer just getting the news from your broadcast channels or your main cable channels, they're getting it on social media. So, they have to drive clicks and they have to keep up with what's current.

Oftentimes they have their finger in the air to figure out where the wind's blowing and what sort of content they have to drive to make sure that folks are clicking on their sites. For a long time, folks were saying people like the Washington Post or the New York times, or whoever it may be, these newspaper outlets were going to die because of the digital age, so they had to adjust to that. And, I think a lot of the content that you see specifically online, is because of the more competition that's out there.

Peter Rough:

Well, let me pick up then on news as advocacy, since that seems to be a theme that's connecting all of your opening comments. Martin Gorey had an interesting article on the modern media landscape in the City Journal, which is the Manhattan Institute Flagship publication. And basically, the thrust of his argument in this article he lays out, which is in the winter edition 2021, starts with that media traditionally was basically connecting advertisers to subscribers. And so, they had an incentive to remain relatively unbiased and to hive off opinion into the opinion section and to leave news basically clinical, and the classically trained reporter model of news gathering. With the digital age undermining that business model, which is another theme I think we're picking up on already in our remarks, a lot of these organizations have moved towards advocacy as journalism.

Maybe the most successful example of this is The 1619 Project of the New York times, which is introducing a level of advocacy journalism in to the new section, that's now in school curriculum. I've seen 1619 spray painted on some statutes and so forth in the protest of the last several months. Is this now the business model? Josh, you mentioned that searching for clicks and looking for clicks is driving a lot of decision making of how media is positioning itself. Is this the future that we're going to have fewer clinically trained journalistic platforms and more and more searching for viewers to stave off bankruptcy by pushing into advocacy, or is that an overreach?

Josh Holmes:

No, I think the change in the business model is a really big piece of the puzzle here. You're right, the old school way of connecting advertisers basically to an audience through focused on building your audience. The problem is that you can't build a non-partisan audience any longer. It doesn't exist. People are consistently looking for reinforcing information. And, if they're not going to get it on cable television, they're going to go get it online. If they're not going to get it online, they'll get it in the newsletter or something else on social media. There is begun this unraveling of centralized facts that are

very difficult to repackage back up. And, Jon mentioned CNN, CNN I think is a pretty good example of that. They had a reputation for many years. Conservatives we've always had an issue. We called it The Clinton News Network and whatnot but, generally speaking it tried to put itself between MSNBC and Fox.

And in the Trump years, they made a business decision that that just wasn't good for viewership. And, the product that they presented was 24 hours a day of Trump criticism knowing that they could just continue to drive viewership with that higher and higher and higher just out of making people incensed. People criticize Fox for this, doing the same thing in the late 90s, early 2000s all the way through today, but you see almost every media outlet do that. And the sneaky one is what I referred to when we were just talking about is how news publications like The Washington Post, New York Times, have done that. There's been a ton of attention on political advertising on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter and others. Some social media platforms have banded altogether. What nobody has talked about is how the subscriber-ship of The Washington Post and New York Times has grown exponentially in the last few years.

And the reason for that, is because they're advertising mercilessly to extremely select group that they know will have a reaction to the content that they're providing. Now, we don't have open eyes into what it is that they're advertising, but I'd be wager to take a guess. It's the most animating element of politics over the last few years and that's Trump. The problem ultimately with that business model is that what you're left with is a subscriber-ship that is inherently left, and you have to figure out how to cater to that in order to continue the subscriber-ship. That's going to be a real challenge as we get into the Biden years. I'm not sure how they're going to hold that all together, but it's something that's going to be really interesting to watch.

Peter Rough:

Jon, what do you think about the changing business models of media?

Jon Lerner:

I think Josh's comments are entirely right. I keep dating myself, I guess here I might be the oldest guy on the panel today. I lived in London in the late 1980s for a while, and I was struck at that time by what they are... This is a common model throughout Europe. The newspapers were largely affiliated with the political parties. So, The Telegraph was the Conservative Party paper, The Guardian was the Labor Party paper, and you'd see this in Germany and France and other countries.

And it was stunning to me because, even though in those days The New York Times was a very liberal paper, there was not this organic connection to one side over the other as there was in this European model. And now, we're there not largely. Conservatives view one set of media outlets, liberals view another set, and there's relatively little cross-pollination. One could argue whether that's a good or a bad development. As a fan of free markets, I generally MLK with that. It's like, if you want to consume whatever kind of news you prefer, go for it. But it does have this polarizing impact on our electorate and how politics is conducted in the country.

Peter Rough:

Roshan, did you want to add something?

Roshan Patel:

To Jon's last point, it's spot on. I think because these are for-profits and they're looking to raise revenue and do the things that they need to do to survive, I do think they get a bit in their own lane in which they

think that's going to develop the most viewers. I guess if we go away from The Post or New York Times or The Washington Times or whatever it may be, I do think that in the world of campaigning, and whether or not as a campaign manager or political strategist whatever it may be talking to a candidate, if you decide which networks you choose to go on, you're typically going to go to the more friendlier networks.

The Republicans have their line and the Democrats obviously, we have ours. I think you see that across all the types. The one area that blows all that up whether it's print or TV, and we've seen this in the last two presidential elections, is that social media piece where folks can create their own narrative and run with it. And if you see where people mostly consume a lot of their news, obviously outside of TV which is the biggest, it is that social media piece. It's in small percentage, but it's still a significant amount.

Peter Rough:

Well, let me just stay on that because I think to the point of Twitter, which seems to be really the political social media format. On the one hand, it has a pernicious effect which Josh mentioned, which is that it's a little bit divorced, I think, from what's happening in the country and a lot of the political currents out in America. They're very narrow epistemic communities thought bubbles in Washington and New York and elsewhere on Twitter that are separate from what's happening in say Mississippi or Iowa or Minnesota. So, that's a reason totally to dismiss it.

On the other hand, it strikes me as an enormously important editor of the daily news in a way that, as I said earlier, maybe The Today Show or Morning Joe used to play that role or maybe others 15 years ago. Maybe I'm describing too much importance to those morning shows. But the point being, Twitter now almost decides, and I don't mean the organization, but the communities and the way they interact on that, what's proper and what's not. And so, on the one hand you can't live without it. On the other hand, it's a huge problem and I don't know how to think about that. I see Jon smirking, so John I'll let you enter that for a first.

Jon Lerner:

No, I think your comments were good. I was only smirking at your notion that you can't live without it. I've actually been putting up with no presence on Twitter my entire life. And as it's developed, I've only become more pleased with my early decisions. But yeah, Twitter is a factor. President Trump was a real, in a sense, pioneer. Not in the sense that he was the first, but he was the first to make Twitter as impactful in political communication as he did. And as it has become, many other political figures are on Twitter very frequently without nearly the kind of reach or impact that Trump had. Well, I was going to say continues to have, but I suppose he'll continue to have it in other forums, not Twitter. Other than some really big political forces like Trump, I think sometimes the impact of Twitter can be overstated. A lot goes on there that goes largely unnoticed.

Peter Rough:

Josh?

Josh Holmes:

So, the way I look at the different platforms, Twitter is like a politics industry interaction. It has every journalist in Washington, D.C., and New York on it way too much, spending hours upon hours upon hours. And you also have operatives from both Democratic and Republican side on it for hours and hours and hours. And so, Jon's entirely right that its ability to translate to large masses is basically nonexistent. But, what I noticed from about 2012 to 2013 through current day, is that there's an awful

lot that you can do to get ahead of stories, to shape stories, to change narratives, to understand what the other side is pushing, to see the cadence of the day, for a communicator whose job it is to try to shape the news just by watching the rhythms in Twitter. And, Facebook I see as the platform that is used most successfully to get far beyond the beltway, to get into your average news consumer.

I think there was a Pew study a couple of years ago that showed something like 54% or 56% of people who regularly consume news content, consume it first on Facebook. That's an enormous and stunning number. It doesn't mean that it's just friends on Facebook, it could be New York Times story or AP or whatever that's shared on Facebook. But the point is, that's the medium and you can advertise against it. Which has been the source of a lot of consternation and argument about what's appropriate and how narrowly you can target. But the reality is up until current day, the targeting has been pretty specific. And I think the candidates of both sides have been able to use it very effectively to get beyond the media filter to go direct to consumer and a lot of messages.

Peter Rough:

Roshan?

Roshan Patel:

I think in this world of Attention Deficit Disorder across all folks that follow politics, that are in politics, specifically the beltway and how folks consume it, Twitter is the easiest way to get to somebody very quickly. And to Josh's point on how you can set the tone or set the day using Twitter to get to have the story, Twitter just seems to be the easiest way and at some point it may be outdated a little bit. And, a lot of it is driven because Trump was such an avid user and an effective user of the platform, so it just drew a lot of eyeballs to the platform and a lot of users to the platform.

I think in the 24 hour news cycle, what happens this morning is long forgotten because of an instrument like Twitter. Because, things get there so quickly and spread so quickly, you already forgot what happened this morning, because we've moved on. Twitter just allows for that. And it's hard for campaigns to stay relevant because of that. Jon and Josh, you know you've got to set your message at the beginning of the week and hope that you can carry it till Friday, because given the different platforms that exist, you're likely going to get knocked off your rocker a little bit, probably on Monday afternoon.

Peter Rough:

I read the other day that in the last two decades, over 2000 local newspapers have shuttered their doors. And so, there's clearly a crisis in local media. The Charleston Post and Courier is actually launching a new initiative this week to work with small local town newspapers to try to shine a light on local politics, because there are opportunities for corruption and other problems when there isn't a local city aldermen in the sense of a newspaper, or officeman overlooking these things is problematic. Roshan, when you work in the States be it with the Lieutenant Governor's Association or campaigns, or just racial advocacy or whatever it might be, since the world is becoming so digital as you described it, is there still a local news? Is there still a local flavor to it? I suppose the Trump years have nationalized everything and that might not be fading but, how do you see that?

Roshan Patel:

I think the great thing about working on governor's races and constitutional elections at the state level, is because you do fly maybe a little bit off the radar from the national narrative. We saw in the 2020 elections obviously anytime you have a presidential election, you have way more enthusiasm and

participation, and we saw record numbers this year. But, I think when the pandemic last March 1st hit, the void of leadership at the federal level, Republican and Democrat governors had to take the helm and lead their states.

And, they benefited from that electorally. Phil Scott, a Republican Governor in Vermont won re-election candidly. Roy Cooper in North Carolina in a state where Donald Trump won the state and Thom Tillis won re-election for his Senate seat, we had a Democratic governor win reelection. So, I think those state constitutional offices, it's like they say about mayors, it's about picking up the trash and filling potholes. I think the same is true for governors and other statewide.

Peter Rough:

People News still has a point about all politics being local. Let's go then to another topic and that's just how campaigning has changed. And again, since I worked with you Josh, I'll come back to you and just think back to those heady days at the RNC at L506. Where when we wanted to get a message out, there really were only two or three ways to do that. Paid TV cable now is starting to really decline, pitching reporters directly and journalism.

I suppose that's a question, does it still have its gate keeping responsibilities? I think the consensus is that, that's eroding a little bit. And then, third would be I suppose talk radio and Rush Limbaugh passing away yesterday, I think the conservative talk radio strength is ebbing a little bit. So, how has campaigning changed? What would Josh Holmes in 2021, tell Josh Holmes of 2005, 2006, about how politics is changing and getting a message out has changed?

Josh Holmes:

Yeah, it's funny. I remember in the early days having to come up with gimmicks. I'm sure Jon remembers this and Rosh, but you had to do everything you could do to get the attention of three or four people. It was a pretty small amount of people that you had to try to get interested in your stuff. So, you'd chase a candidate around with an ambulance or something. It was just ridiculous, just to try to draw attention to yourself. Look, I think that the biggest change in politics that is not appreciated or understood entirely for how it's shaping up everything is how campaigns are financed. Campaigns are financed today almost 80% with low dollar digital contributions. Meaning, Americans nationalized at \$50 or less repetitively through a campaign cycle.

And so, the media strategy on top of that is to try to appear before as many potential donors as you can with consistently driving in red meat that gets them to click their buttons. And, act blue is way ahead of Republicans, the democratic processor. This was way ahead of Republicans in their ability to provide a marketplace for democratic donors to go in, provide one click Amazon-like functionality for people who wanted to donate to democratic candidates if they just saw on their TV or heard on the radio or podcast or something like that. Republicans are now catching up. But the reason why that's so significant is because, it not only changes the way that your campaign is financed and what you're responsive to in terms of keeping your campaign afloat, it also dictates your messaging.

And you see people engage much further to the left and right than they ordinarily would because of that piece of how their campaigns are actually financed. It used to be, 20 years ago, when campaigns were financed almost exclusively with high-end donors, the soft money days, that you would have a more moderated message in large part because your donors were more moderated people. Here, the bulk of the donors on both sides do not have any sort of centrist views at all. This is high information flow, high intensity partisanship. So, I think it's dictated everything from the infrastructure of your campaign, to what it is that people are talking about on a day-to-day basis.

Peter Rough:

Jon, what do you think about that? And also, you mentioned earlier that there's still traditional ways of spending money, one of which is paid TVs, do you think that's going to be the case going forward, given the decline in cable?

Jon Lerner:

Josh's point I think is fundamentally right, but it's not always right. And, I wonder if our Democratic friend here might care to comment on it. You look at Joe Biden in the recently completed democratic presidential primaries, Biden was nowhere close to the most fire-breathing, red meat, liberal messenger in that field, a field of Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders and lots of others. And he didn't have the most money. He certainly didn't have the most small dollar givers, and yet he was able to prevail. Even if you look at 2016 on the Republican side, in some ways Donald Trump had the most what you might call fringy sort of message, but in other ways he didn't. You had Ted Cruz in that field who are most measurements was further to the right ideologically than Trump.

So, I do agree with the basic point that Josh has made, but it doesn't cover every circumstance. I remember shortly after the 2016 presidential election, I did a lecture at Villanova University about that. And this was shortly after the world was still stunned that Hillary Clinton lost to Donald Trump. And then the point I made there, which I think is relevant to our discussion is that the fundamentals of campaigns are more the same than they are different over the years. There are differences in the point raised about the media and about the low dollar fundraising is certainly true, but if you look at Hillary Clinton's campaign by many traditional metrics was better than Donald Trump.

She raised more money than Trump. She had a bigger organization than Trump's. She had a more seasoned team than Trump's. She ran more ads. Largely, the mainstream media was heavily on her side. She was not a popular figure, but her unfavorable ratings were always lower than Trump's unfavorable's. But, Trump had one metric on his side that was better than the Clintons, and that one metric was enough for him to win. And the one metric was that he had a message that was more attractive to voters. Make America Great Again, and all of the attendant things that came with that overcame all of these other traditional metrics of advantages that Hillary Clinton had. And a take from that is, candidate messages still matter more than any of these other things, even though the other things do matter a lot as well.

Roshan Patel:

I would add to that. I think when it comes to that online grassroots donor base, I would say that maybe the biggest difference is that it's not so much what your message is, it's creating a foe. And, I think what animates those grassroots donors as much as let's say on the democratic side, they care about democratic ideals and ideas that we believe in access to health care, all that kind of stuff. I think it's using that energy online to create a foe and to get those people excited about defeating somebody as much as it is a winning an election. Trump has been able, and he's such a unique personality, being the populace that he is does get people excited about his candidacy or his last four years. But there's no doubt that he's able to create a villain more than anybody. And if you look from the election on, the stop the still efforts, I'm sure it's fundraising went up like a hockey stick because he was able to create that foe.

Peter Rough:

Well, it does feel like we're living a little bit in the era of protest. I'm obviously active in foreign affairs, so I think back to the era of spring which is not much of a celebration, but it's 10 years or so on. We started

last decade with the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street. We then had MAGA, BLM, MeToo. They're all very different obviously, but I think one thing that unites all of these are that they're social media driven anti-establishment messages. And, those seem to have loads of energy. And I wonder, is it possible to have an energetic campaign or to mobilize in a way that... I don't want to say is positive, because those aren't necessarily negative causes. I'm not trying to put a value judgment on any of them. But the point being is, can you run an anti-establishment people centered? Does a people centered campaign have to be anti-establishment? I suppose is the way I would put it. Josh, do you have any thoughts on that?

Josh Holmes:

Yeah, I do. I always think it's the right messenger. Now, it's much more difficult today to do what you're describing. It's the easiest and laziest form of generating political activities to go straight nag hard anti-establishment messaging, because it resonates every time and it's really easy. But it's been a long time since we've had a messenger. You could argue that Barack Obama's first campaign in 2008 was like that. The hope and change component of that had some optimism to it. But you really have to go back to Reagan on the conservative side where you get that open, optimistic, forward looking vision that reduces opposition by virtue of its positive tone. Do I think it's possible again? I do.

But, it almost has to come from somebody who is outside of the political context already, because all of the incentive structures for current politicians align with the opposite. What Rosh was talking about with creating a villain is exactly right. That's what everybody has done here for several cycles. And so, that's the muscle memory of it. You almost have to have something from outside or a really different candidate who just decides, "You know what? The hell with it if I get blown out, I'm just going to go in an entirely different direction." Because, I think the modern campaign consultancy advises against what you're suggesting, because it's never really proven to get over the hump in modern days.

Peter Rough:

I guess that takes us to what is basically our third topic which is, what are the priorities of the American people? Are we on top of those? Does Washington represent those? Are those changing or staying the same? Maybe Jon you could kick us off on that as well. What is it that the public is looking for? You have 30 seconds to answer.

Jon Lerner:

Well, I'm not sure if this is where you're going, but I'll make a point that, presidents do have an effect in leading public opinion within their own party in certain directions. So, after 9/11, President George W. Bush led Republican public opinion for a very long period of time in the direction of favoring the war on terrorism and the various national security, and even domestic policies that came from Adam. So, you heard Republican voters much more engaged in that set of issues than they had been before. Similarly, President Trump, certainly with respect to the immigration issue, had a major impact on Republican attitudes about that issue.

Some other issues as well, though less so trade policy, for example. What also happens is that it tends to push the other party in the other direction. So, in my lifetime, the Democratic Party has never been as anti-Russia, for example, as they are today. Or even, as pro-free trade as they are today, largely in response to President Trump's policies. So, when you ask where does the public want to go, there is this question of who is leading whom. Is the public leading the politicians, or are the politicians leading the public? I think in some ways, both of those things exist.

Peter Rough:

You have any thoughts on that Roshan?

Roshan Patel:

I guess if you boil it down, and Jon may have a sense of this back in his Poland days. I think generally speaking, the American people want similar things as far as an ideological message or path. But generally, it's education, it's access to healthcare, it's a good paying job. After that, when life is pretty good, you can start to think about maybe more controversial or French type issues. But I think when you boil it down, I know when we look at polling especially at the state level given the impact of governors on education systems and their state, education and access to healthcare and the economy, generally in some form or fashion ranking the top three.

Now, after the 9/11 Attack, obviously, counter terrorism and safety ranks up there. What Trump was able to do was take an old issue that had died down, when it came to immigration, globalization, which I think is an issue that we will continue to address and bring that into realm. So, I think generally speaking long way around is to say, I think the American people generally care about the same things, but when things are going really well they can wander off into other lanes.

Peter Rough:

Do you think there's a realignment underway? There's a lot of talk about it. That the major divide isn't just between liberal and conservative, but between now urban or rural. And so, you begin to have shifts in that direction which obviously have implications. Chris Caldwell wrote this in a lengthy essay last year. In the past, Republicans have generally been the party of capital. This is very reductionist, but capital. Democrats, the party of labor.

And so, the two needed one another and could govern together. But if one is the party of the dynamic economy and the urban elites, and one is the economy of rural America and rural Mores, it's not so clear that they can find a common purpose and join together when it comes around to governing. But, do you even buy the premise that there is a shift underway? Or, do you still think the way to think about American politics is progressive and conservative?

Roshan Patel:

I think there is a shift. I think the pandemic has brought to the light discrepancies in both pockets. Look at broadband. You have folks in the inner city without access to broadband, can't log on and go to virtual class, same in the rural areas. I think there are things that can bring those great people together, but I think in a good economy with low unemployment, you see a lot of mobility and you see people moving from places where they may be, or a state where they may not necessarily agree with all of their politics, moving to other States where they're around more like-minded people. That migration is happening. It continues to happen. It has slowed down obviously because of the economy and the pandemic, but I think that we'll pick back up. Blue States are getting bluer and red States are getting redder, that's happening. And, you can even go down county by county. I think the pandemic has maybe slow that down a little bit, but I think that transition is actually happening.

Josh Holmes:

Yeah. Look, I agree. I think there are a couple of things that are concerning about a realignment particularly during the pandemic that have just become in technicolor for those of us who watch this closely. Is that the pandemic has exposed a whole bunch of rifts that start with folks whose lives didn't really change all that much from their job, to their income, to their private schools for their kids. And

then you look service sector, world manufacturing, AG industries, and the huge disruptions and changes that people have had. And so, the realignment in some ways we always thought about in terms of kind of Trump messaging and focusing on the quote unquote forgotten man. But there seems to be a socioeconomic component to driving a lot of this, that you wonder at what point it starts to become more and more of a problem and you're not able to put it back together as Rosh was talking about.

I think Republicans have one or two cycles in front of them to figure out how to recapture suburban voters who had been with them for two decades, really reliably for two decades, that fell off the face of the planet in 2018 and to a lesser extent, but still we're not there for them in 2020. They gained a whole bunch in rural America with traditionally democratic blue collar voters, but not enough to offset that growing population center. And so, to the extent that this becomes a socioeconomic argument and that realignment excludes suburban America. In addition to urban and the education system, Hollywood elite and everything else, that's going to be a permanent divorce that is going to be very, very difficult for Republicans to get back. And, I think it's going to require an awful lot of leadership to get there.

Peter Rough:

Jon, do you have any closing thoughts?

Jon Lerner:

Well, that's a very powerful and correct point. If you look at the map just from the last two presidential elections, you can see that. So, the trade off, this is the Brexit kind of vote as we saw in the UK. The anywheres and the some where's. That changing dynamic helps Republican fortunes in Ohio and Pennsylvania where Trump won both in 16. Won Ohio in 20 and came very close in Pennsylvania in 20. And it hurts us in some places like Arizona and Georgia.

But the net of that if you look at population trends, is that it moves in the direction of a winning hand for a better hand for Democrats than Republicans. So, we as Republicans I would say, do have to address the damage that's been done in the suburban areas and it's a big challenge. I think the Democrats have the easier hand to play now, but there's also the burdens of responsibility that the Democrats are now in charge of the entire federal government. Let's see whether the American people are happy with the product they get.

Peter Rough:

Well, the Democrats might have an easier hand to play, but Roshan had a comment in the lines saying that there were with two Republicans. I don't think my own party affiliation is much of a secret, so. Thanks a lot Roshan for coming. Josh, really appreciate you taking the time today. Jon, fun as always, thanks for taking the time. And, thank you all for joining us today.

Josh Holmes:

Thank you.