

Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS



CONFERENCE REPORT: A PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN AN UNCERTAIN TIME

Mark P. Jones, Ph.D.

Fellow in Political Science

John B. Williams

Fellow, Presidential Elections Program

December 2019

© 2020 by Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy

This material may be quoted or reproduced without prior permission, provided appropriate credit is given to the author and Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy.

Wherever feasible, papers are reviewed by outside experts before they are released. However, the research and views expressed in this paper are those of the individual researcher(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of the Baker Institute.

Mark P. Jones, Ph.D.

John B. Williams

“A Presidential Election in an Uncertain Time”

<https://doi.org/10.25613/ft7q-3q89>

About the Presidential Elections Program

Founded in 2017, the Baker Institute's Presidential Elections Program is the nation's first program solely dedicated to the study of U.S. presidential campaigns and elections.

The program examines presidential elections in a nonpartisan manner, providing timely analysis during and after each presidential election cycle and allowing stakeholders of all political parties and groups to better understand the changing dynamics of presidential campaigns. Each conference will explore the various political and policy issues of that contest and their effects on the presidential election process and on elections and democracy in the United States in general.

As part of its activities, the program will conduct biennial conferences on topics of high political and policy salience. A conference will be held in the year preceding and the year after each presidential election to explore the dynamics of that contest and its effects on elections and democracy in the United States.

The Presidential Elections Program builds on the vast experience of the institute's honorary chair, Secretary James A. Baker, III, whose roles in presidential campaigns are unmatched. He helped lead five presidential campaigns and later supervised the legal team that preserved George W. Bush's victory in 2000. It is fitting that the country's premier institution devoted to the study of presidential elections is located at Rice University's James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy.

In August 1976, President Gerald Ford demonstrated his high regard for Baker by asking him to be his national campaign chairman for the general election effort against Georgia Governor Jimmy Carter. The national press dubbed Baker a "Miracle Man" for transforming the Ford campaign, which was initially seen as having no realistic hope of defeating Carter. Under Baker's guidance, the campaign was revived, and Ford narrowly lost the Electoral College by a mere 18,490 votes in Hawaii and Ohio.

Baker then began to organize George H.W. Bush's Republican presidential primary campaign in 1980. Former California Governor Ronald Reagan ultimately won the nomination, but not before he unified his party by choosing his most tenacious primary rival as his running mate: Bush.

In the 1980 general election, Baker was a senior advisor to the Reagan-Bush campaign, with specific responsibility for the presidential debates. Baker's acute political instincts, his prior Washington experience, and his attention to detail made a strong impression on the Reagans. And so, Reagan asked Baker to be his White House chief of staff.

Again, with Baker's assistance, Reagan was reelected in 1984 with a 49-state landslide victory over former Vice President Walter Mondale in a campaign largely run from Baker's chief of staff office.

In 1988, Bush was a two-term vice president and the putative front-runner in the Republican primaries. With Reagan's reluctant blessing, Baker left what by then was his prestigious post as secretary of the treasury and assumed command of Bush's presidential campaign. Bush defeated Michael Dukakis to become the 41st president of the United States, and Baker became its 61st secretary of state.

As the 1992 election year began, Bush's high approval ratings began to erode. In July, he asked Baker to resign his cabinet post and to take over the leadership of his reelection campaign. That November, Bush lost after his campaign was adversely affected by the independent candidacy of Ross Perot.

In 2000, Baker returned to the presidential electoral process, this time to manage Texas Governor George W. Bush's legal team in the Florida recount process. Under Baker's leadership, the Bush campaign successfully pursued its complex legal case that led from county offices in south Florida to the U.S. Supreme Court in Washington, D.C. After the Supreme Court ruled in his favor, Bush became the nation's 43rd president.

On December 9, 2019 at the Baker Institute, the Presidential Elections Program held its second conference, "A Presidential Election in an Uncertain Time." The conference brought together a diverse group of academics, campaign consultants, journalists, and other prominent individuals to explore the political and cultural issues surrounding the 2020 election, including political polarization, waning public confidence in social and political institutions, and the complexities of primaries and caucuses. Veteran political consultants James Carville and Mary Matalin served as the conference's honorary directors. This report summarizes the presentations and discussions of the many individuals who participated in the four thematic panels as well as a lunch conversation featuring Carville and Matalin.

Panel I: Rising Polarization

Ever since the 2016 presidential election, our nation has been increasingly polarized. Political animosity and distrust have flourished, and the political divide between Republicans and Democrats has deepened. The first panel, "Rising Polarization" examined the presence, evolution, and intensity of this polarization in both the American public and in Congress. Panelists also discussed potential solutions to ameliorate the consequences of this polarization.

Stephen Hawkins, the director of research at More in Common, an organization that researches and finds solutions for the underlying causes of polarization, started by presenting his research, "Polarization Within the Public." Following this, Jeffrey B. Lewis, a professor of political science at UCLA, discussed an established approach for mapping out the political divisions between members of Congress in his presentation, "Polarization in the U.S. Congress." Lastly, John Arnold, the founder and co-chair of Arnold Ventures, an organization dedicated to finding research-driven solutions for some of the most pressing

problems in the United States, presented “Strategies to Reduce Polarization.” Former Harris County Judge Edward M. Emmett moderated the panel.

Stephen Hawkins: Polarization Within the Public

As the 2020 presidential election quickly approaches, the public seems more divided than ever. Stephen Hawkins’ presentation focused on this growing polarization and highlighted five key findings based on two years of original research of U.S. public opinion.

First, Hawkins asserted that polarization is deep and significant and is driven by political identities of hostility toward each other. Currently, nine in 10 Americans feel this is the most divided the country has been in their lifetimes, while 90% of both Democrats and Republicans describe their partisan opponents as “brainwashed” or “hateful.” Similarly, 90% of Americans say political conflict is strong in the United States, which is higher than the number saying class or racial conflict is strong in the country.

Hawkins underscored, however, that while polarization is significant, the national debate often overlooks another segment of the population, the “exhausted majority,” which is ideologically diverse but united in the sense that they are fed up with the division in U.S. politics and do not feel their interests are represented by either politicians or by the mass media. Hawkins identified this “exhausted majority” as the initial target for any national effort to reduce polarization in the United States.

Second, Hawkins explored how misperception contributes to polarization. Hawkins’ research revealed a significant perception gap in the United States. In general, the more partisan an American is, the more likely they are to overestimate how extreme and different their partisan opponents are from them. This misperception in turn generates and perpetuates cycles of animosity, distrust, and retribution among rival partisan camps.

Hawkins’ third assertion was that national discourse amplifies the division. Hawkins’ analysis detailed how the country’s national media often elevate extreme views and highlight divisions. As a result, the more Americans consume media (other than the network news of ABC, CBS, and NBC), the greater the perception gap they are likely to have.

Fourth, according to Hawkins’ research, social psychology can help to explain how Americans’ clashing perspectives are shaped by their core beliefs. Hawkins presented five core beliefs that influence peoples’ views and decisions: group favoritism and identity, perceived threat, parenting style and authoritarianism, moral foundations, and personal agency and responsibility.

Lastly, Hawkins’ fifth point was a potential solution: speaking to core beliefs can cut through polarization. Hawkins’ research indicates that while certain combinations of the aforementioned core beliefs can reinforce polarization, others can reduce it, suggesting that political messaging that balances these core beliefs can help to ameliorate polarization. More in Common’s research agenda focuses on how properly addressing core beliefs can cut through polarization by focusing on messages that result in affirmation by a large

majority of the population (as opposed to rejection) and likewise result in a positive emotional response by a majority of the population (as opposed to a negative response).

Jeffrey B. Lewis: Polarization in the U.S. Congress

In the second presentation, Jeffrey B. Lewis analyzed the level and evolution of partisan polarization in the U.S. Congress. To do so, he drew on the resources of the Voteview Project (<https://voteview.com>), which provides information on every congressional roll call vote in U.S. history.

Lewis opened with an overview of the NOMINATE methodology, which provides a data-science approach to measure and map out the polarization in Congress. The NOMINATE procedure provides an efficient and intuitive summary of congressional members' roll call voting records and makes it very easy to visualize how voting records differ across partisan lines in the U.S. House and U.S. Senate as well as in other legislatures (such as the Texas Legislature for which the Baker Institute's Texas Politics Program conducts similar analysis). When mapping congressional members' roll call votes, the more votes any two congressional members agree on, the closer they are placed on the ideological map.

The NOMINATE data allowed Lewis to place U.S. House members and U.S. Senators on a two-dimensional map that displays voting behavior in Congress. The most salient dimension is the left-right (or liberal-conservative) dimension. Throughout U.S. history, there has also existed a second dimension of varying salience (though its salience pales in comparison to that of the "first" left-right dimension), which has reflected differences within the major parties over issues such as slavery and civil rights.

The first dimension (left-right) data presented by Lewis revealed that the ideological distance between the median U.S. House of Representatives member of the Republican Party and of the Democratic Party has grown over time, especially during the past 30 years. Republicans are becoming increasingly conservative and Democrats are becoming increasingly liberal, though the change is not as distinct for Democrats as it is for Republicans. Representative of this growing partisan polarization is the shift in the ideological position of Southern U.S. House members. This shift occurred as the formerly "solid" Democratic South realigned, with conservative whites shifting their allegiance to the Republican Party, and the Democratic Party's base in the South shifting primarily to African Americans, Latinos, and a reduced number of liberal urban whites.

Lewis noted that there has also been a growing level of polarization in the U.S. Senate, which provides evidence that gerrymandering and increasingly "safe" partisan districts are not the only source of this rising polarization nationwide, since U.S. senators are elected statewide. During the past 20 years, however, the level of partisan polarization in the U.S. House has been consistently higher than that in the U.S. Senate.

Lewis also evaluated the level of partisan polarization in the U.S. House and U.S. Senate from 1880 to the present, revealing that partisan polarization was very high between 1880 and 1910 (roughly similar to that of the 1990s and 2000s and not dramatically less than today) before

dropping into a trough of low polarization that would plateau from around 1930 to 1980. Lewis suggested that this period of low polarization could be an aberration, with the high levels of polarization we are experiencing today being closer to “normal” instead.

Lewis concluded with a case study of Congressman Will Hurd (R-Helotes). Regarding the left-right dimension, Texas’ current 36 House members range from Sylvia Garcia (D-Houston) as the most liberal to Chip Roy (R-Austin) as the most conservative. Hurd is the most centrist Republican while Henry Cuellar (D-Laredo) is the most centrist Democrat.

Lewis used Hurd to exemplify how the GOP House delegation has moved to the right ideologically over the past 40 years. Using NOMINATE’s historical time frame, Lewis showed that Hurd’s ideological location would have placed 52% of House Republicans to his left in 1979. Using the same methodology, Lewis detailed how this proportion fell dramatically by 2019, when only 7% of House Republicans had an ideological location to the left of Hurd.

John D. Arnold: Strategies to Reduce Polarization

John D. Arnold began his presentation by placing the problem of partisan polarization within the broader context of the public policy process. He emphasized how rising polarization has made it increasingly difficult to get legislation passed in the U.S. Congress. Arnold Ventures, a philanthropy run by Arnold and his wife, strives to make policy advances in areas such as criminal justice, health, education, and public finance. The dysfunction in Washington D.C. has made it increasingly difficult for Arnold Ventures to carry out its principal mission of improving the quality of life for the American public.

Realizing that the success of Arnold Ventures’ policy work was being stymied by dysfunction in Washington and across the country, Arnold and his colleagues began a line of work on democracy. Arnold Ventures concluded that for it to be successful in its mission at the federal level, it needed a functional Congress. Therefore, it has begun to support several initiatives designed to reduce the dysfunction and to improve the functionality of Congress.

Arnold Ventures’ philosophy is to try to understand the rules and incentives of the system they are trying to improve, while also being realistic about what they can affect. It does not matter how important the issue is if there is no political will to get it done.

Arnold Ventures’ philosophy uses a four-quadrant system to determine the feasibility of their efforts. The X-axis is the probability of success of their effort and the Y-axis is the impact of the effort. The upper right quadrant is the “unicorn” quadrant, which almost never occurs—when the probability of success and the intended impact are both high. Conversely, the low probability of success and low impact quadrant is clearly not an attractive option for obvious reasons. Therefore, being realists, Arnold Ventures focuses on the remaining two quadrants where either there is a low probability of success and a high impact or a high probability of success and a low impact. These are the quadrants that are both feasible and where some progress, albeit at times very incremental, can be made.

Arnold Ventures is also working to improve the ways in which politicians are chosen in two ways. The first is related to the election rules and the second is related to the drawing of legislative districts.

In the first realm, the broad goal is to make party primaries more representative of the electorate. To effect this change, Arnold Ventures has followed three strategies.

One strategy is to support the adoption of top-two primaries, as used in California and Washington state. In a top-two primary system, there is no limit on the number of candidates from any political party competing in elections within a single-member legislative district. In the primary, the two candidates who receive the most votes move on to the general election where the candidate who receives the most votes wins. Top-two primaries can increase the electoral prospects of moderate candidates from each party who possess a greater level of inter-party crossover appeal than their more extreme co-partisans.

Another strategy is to adopt open primaries so every registered voter is eligible to vote in the partisan primary of any party they choose. Today, 12 states continue to have closed primaries, where only individuals who are registered as members of the party can vote in its primaries. The adoption of open primaries is also considered to be a way to improve the electoral chances of moderate candidates.

A third strategy is to adopt ranked-choice voting (RCV) as has been done for various elections in San Francisco, Maine, and most recently, New York City. Under RCV, voters rank-order the candidates from most to least preferred. If no candidate wins an absolute majority of the first preferences, the candidate with the least amount of preferences is eliminated and their second preferences redistributed among the remaining candidates. This process repeats until a candidate has won a majority of votes. RCV encourages moderation among the candidates and can prevent the election of extreme candidates with limited, albeit plurality, support. RCV also generates more civil campaigns, as candidates are concerned about winning the second, third, and other preferences of their rivals.

Arnold Ventures also focuses on extreme partisan gerrymandering. When one party controls the redistricting process, as in Texas, extreme partisan gerrymandering can result from a redistricting process that favors one party and crafts a majority of legislative districts where one party is virtually set to win in the November elections. To obtain more competitive districts, where elected officials must be concerned with more than just the extreme members of their party who participate in the primaries, Arnold Ventures supports independent redistricting commissions, which tend to draw more competitive legislative districts.

Overall, Arnold viewed these reforms as viable strategies that can reduce partisan polarization in the country. By reducing partisan polarization, efforts to create political conditions that are more conducive to compromise and dialogue will increase the odds that salient policy reforms in areas such as education, health, and fiscal policy will pass rather than languish in the face of intractable, hyper-partisan polarization.

Panel II: Trust and Confidence

The years leading up to the 2020 presidential election have not only seen record levels of political polarization, but also a dramatic decrease in public trust and confidence in government institutions. Panelists in this session explored some of the underlying reasons why public trust in the government has been declining so precipitously and what can be done to foster a more unified political environment.

The four panelists were leading public opinion experts. Michael Dimock, president of the Pew Research Center, began the panel with his presentation, “Trust, Tribes, and Technology.” Jennifer L. Merolla, a professor of political science at the University of California, Riverside followed with a presentation exploring a potential gender gap in political perceptions titled, “Trump, Gender, and Evaluations of Government and Government Actors.” Daron Shaw, professor of government at The University of Texas at Austin, presented next on “The Appearance of Corruption: Public Opinion, Campaign Finance Regulation, and the Court.” Lastly, Lynn Vavreck, the Marvin Hoffenberg Professor of American Politics and Public Policy at the University of California, Los Angeles, presented “Declining Trust in One Another: Battle for the Meaning of America.” Lisa Falkenberg, the *Houston Chronicle’s* Pulitzer Prize winning editor of opinion, moderated the panel.

Michael Dimock: Trust, Tribes, and Technology

Michael Dimock’s presentation drew heavily from the outstanding public opinion research on American political attitudes conducted by the Pew Research Center, which he directs. He discussed the public’s lack of trust in the federal government, the development of political “tribes,” and the growing concerns over technology’s role in shaping how we receive political news.

Dimock recounted how public trust in the U.S. federal government has declined precipitously over the past 60 years. In 1958, 73% of Americans said they trusted the federal government to do what is right “just about always” or “most of the time.” By 2019, that number fell to 17%. Over the past decade this percentage has hovered consistently either right above or right below (more commonly) the 20% threshold.

When discussing the concept of distrust in government, Dimock underscored three things this distrust does not reflect and three things it does reflect. Distrust in government is *not* related to ideology, evaluations of government agencies and the services they provide, and state and local governments. The distrust instead is aimed at elected officials, the electoral system through which they are elected (in particular the redistricting process), and the country’s democratic deficit in representation and accountability.

Americans believe it is very important that elected officials face serious consequences for misconduct (83%), congressional districts are fairly drawn (72%), and voters are knowledgeable about politics (78%). They feel, however, that these ideals are not being

attained as only 30%, 49%, and 39% of voters believe that these respective ideals describe the current political environment in the United States.

In addition to discussing the increasingly high levels of public distrust toward the government, Dimock also discussed the development of political “tribes.” Dimock compared the division among Americans across 10 political values depending on six key demographics (age, education, gender, party, race, and religious attendance.) He showed that party divisions far exceed all other social divisions by a factor of between 2.5 (race) and five (gender). Thus, the scale of political division between Democrats and Republicans is 2.5 times greater than that between whites and non-whites and five times greater than that between men and women.

Dimock emphasized that the increasingly high party polarization is not reflective of a more divided society or more extremism, but rather of a combination of convergence (or residential sorting) and increasing degrees of identity-level animosity.

With the growing distrust in the government and an increase in “tribalized” politics, Dimock also worries about the role of our changing news landscape in shaping the public’s perceptions of the government. Dimock noted that television still serves as the most common source of news for Americans with 49% frequently getting their news on television. However, the percentage of Americans who often get news from television has dropped in recent years, while the proportion who often get news online has risen to 43%. Future trend lines suggest online news will soon eclipse television as the dominant news source for Americans. Television’s advantage over online news is dwindling because it depends heavily on those 65 and older who more often get news from television (81%) than online (32%). Those 65 and older are gradually being replaced by those under 30 who are much more likely to get news online (50%) than from television (16%). Radio, meanwhile, has remained relatively constant as a common news source for about one quarter of Americans (26%), while print newspapers have declined as a principal news sources for Americans with fewer than one in six Americans (16%) frequently getting their news from print newspapers.

Dimock concluded with a note of caution regarding political news in our increasingly fragmented online news environment. More than half of Americans say they often come across political news that is not fully accurate, with 27% saying they sometimes do and 19% saying they hardly ever or never do. Close to a third say they often come across political news that is completely made up, with 39% saying they sometimes come across completely made up political news and 26% saying they hardly ever or never do. These trends, along with the “tribalized” nature of politics, are alarming to many and may be part of the underlying reason why distrust in the government has been on the rise.

Jennifer Merolla: Trump, Gender, and Evaluations of Government and Government Actors

Jennifer Merolla opened her presentation with a discussion about the decline in trust in the U.S. government that has occurred over time. Echoing Dimock, she emphasized the

precipitous decline in trust in the government that has taken place over the past 60 years and the current “plateau,” with trust hovering around 20% this decade.

Merolla also reviewed the main extant scholarly explanations for declining trust in the federal government such as perceptions of rising corruption, a decline in interpersonal trust, and an increasingly polarized environment. Her own, complementary, explanation, however, is based on factors specific to the contemporary political environment, with a particular focus on how trust in the federal government is influenced by evaluations of government officials and institutions and on how these evaluations vary by gender and party.

Merolla highlighted how historically there are no notable differences between women and men in their loss of trust in the federal government. However, she displayed recent evidence of a significant gender gap in terms of how men and women evaluate President Donald Trump across several dimensions. Men were significantly more likely than women to believe that President Trump was honest and trustworthy, that he understood their problems, and that he would make the right decisions.

To better understand the relationship between gender and public attitudes toward government institutions, Merolla reviewed the results of a large-scale, survey-based experiment she designed and conducted. Based on this sophisticated experimental analysis, she came to three general conclusions.

First, issues regarding sexual harassment and misconduct shape people’s evaluations of government officials and of the Democratic and Republican parties. For instance, the more Republican women read about Donald Trump, the more negative their evaluation is likely to be of the Republican Party as an institution.

Second, while issues of sexual harassment and misconduct, such as those publicized by the #MeToo movement, affect the evaluations of the Republican Party and Donald Trump, they do not appear to have any notable effect on evaluations of governmental institutions.

Third, issues of sexual harassment and misconduct have increased the level of engagement in the political system. While this trend is most readily observed among Democratic women, it is also found among Republican women.

Daron Shaw: The Appearance of Corruption—Public opinion, Campaign Finance Regulation, and the Court

Both Dimock and Merolla pointed to public perceptions of corruption as one of the principal sources of declining public trust in U.S. government institutions. Daron Shaw’s presentation dove deeper into this topic by looking at American attitudes toward the government and how their attitudes regarding government functioning (e.g., corruption, trust) affect political participation. Shaw began his presentation with a reminder that such questions formed the cornerstone of the U.S. Supreme Court’s seminal ruling on campaign finance in *Buckley v. Valeo* (1976).

In *Buckley v. Valeo* the Supreme Court was asked to determine to what extent the federal government should regulate political speech in the form of campaign contributions and expenditures. The high court concluded the federal government could only regulate political speech in a narrowly constructed way and only to serve a compelling state interest.

The Supreme Court's reasoning in *Buckley v. Valeo* went this way. First, campaign finance legislation reduces political corruption, both real and imagined. Second, less apparent corruption increases public trust in the government. Third, increased public trust in the government results in greater political participation. Since political participation is essential to the integrity of the electoral process, limited and constrained campaign finance regulations (e.g., limits on contributions to candidates and mandatory disclosure and reporting provisions) were therefore justified and constitutional.

According to Shaw's data, Americans currently believe that there is too much money in politics and that there should be more government regulation of money in politics. That said, Americans tend to be pessimistic about the prospect of enhanced regulations actually reducing the influence and role of money in politics.

Shaw's research also found that contrary to the Supreme Court opinion in *Buckley v. Valeo*, higher levels of perceived corruption do not lead to decreased political participation or lower voter turnout. By the same token, higher levels of trust do not lead to increased political participation. Shaw provided a variety of metrics drawn from survey data to support these findings.

Shaw concluded with two main points. First, perceptions of political corruption in the United States are quite high. However, they are not associated with campaign finance regulations. Second, contrary to the argument made by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Buckley v. Valeo*, the perception of greater corruption increases the likelihood that someone engages in a variety of acts of political participation as well as turns out to vote.

Lynn Vavreck: Declining Trust in One Another—Battle for the Meaning of America

Lynn Vavreck's presentation covered two principal topics. The first was what it means to be an American in 2020. The second was how our institutions can help to reverse the declining trust that Americans have in one another.

Vavreck highlighted the way that presidential candidates frequently frame elections by focusing on viable storylines that will help them to appear favorable to voters. In an era of a booming economy, economic growth and prosperity are expected storylines for an incumbent. If that storyline does not help them, they will search for something that does. When choosing their own storylines, candidates seek out issues where they can connect to more voters than their opponent and where the issue is important or can be made to appear important.

Vavreck used Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again" presidential campaign in 2016 as a case study. She emphasized the success of his campaign's "in-group" versus "out-

group” storylines, which created an us-versus-them dynamic revolving around the issue of safety and security via a focus on immigration-related policies.

Vavreck also looked ahead at potential storylines for 2020, drawing on research from the Democracy Fund + UCLA Nationscape Project survey database. With more than 500,000 surveys being conducted over 18 months in the run-up to the 2020 election, the survey is one of the largest public opinion surveys ever conducted.

The Nationscape data provide information on issues that are important to Democrats, Republicans, and Independents. They highlight issues that can be used to divide American voters, but they also reveal issues that can be used to unify these same voters.

Vavreck ended her presentation on a positive note by highlighting where the Nationscape data point to themes that could help to unify Americans rather than divide them, if the 2020 presidential candidates choose to focus on these themes. Six proposed policies that Vavreck views as viable 2020 messages to unify Americans are: background checks for gun purchases, support for a strong military, universal maternity leave, a path to citizenship for “Dreamers,” a public health care option, and tax cuts for families who earn less than \$100,000 per year.

It will of course be incumbent upon the leading presidential and congressional candidates to adopt and promote the storylines that will dominate the 2020 campaign. However, Vavreck’s research signals that such storylines do not have to be divisive and that multiple storylines exist, that if selected and promoted by candidates can help to unite Americans rather than driving them further apart.

Luncheon and Discussion with James Carville and Mary Matalin

Secretary James A. Baker, III opened the luncheon discussion by introducing the honorary directors of the 2019 conference of the Baker Institute’s Presidential Elections Program, James Carville and Mary Matalin. Carville and Matalin joined political lore when they were married not long after playing competing roles in the 1992 presidential campaigns of Bill Clinton and George H.W. Bush, respectively. The 1992 Bush campaign was the last of five presidential campaigns that Baker led during his storied career in politics.

“Dispassionate, of course, is not a word that describes our speakers,” Baker said. “Mary Matalin and James Carville both burn with a deep passion for politics and an even deeper passion for the well-being of our country, even if it is from opposing sides of the political spectrum.”

“Both of them combine innate intelligence with savvy street smarts, both of them are extremely hardworking, and both know how to work out all the angles,” Baker said. “As a result, they have reached the top of their profession, and we are fortunate to have them with us.”

After Secretary Baker's remarks, Karen Johnson Rove, an Austin-based lobbyist and wife of Karl Rove, moderated the conversation between Matalin and Carville. Johnson Rove joined David Axelrod as one of the honorary co-directors of the 2018 conference of the Presidential Elections Program.

Early in the discussion, Johnson Rove asked Carville and Matalin about past political problems that each had to overcome.

"Obviously, the entire Lewinsky thing was a forced error, to say the least," Carville said, attracting laughs from the crowd. Carville quickly added that President Bill Clinton's affair with White House intern Monica Lewinsky was a reminder that politics is about people who have strong traits but also their own human frailties.

"They might be bigger than life, they might be powerful, they might have different things that happened to them, and they might be famous," Carville said. "But at the end of the day, if you're looking across at President Clinton or either of the President Bushes or President Obama, you're looking at a human being."

Matalin said that one of her biggest errors came during the 1992 Bush-Clinton campaign, when she was temporarily fired for a remark she made about Clinton that some individuals inside the Bush campaign misunderstood. She said that the White House thought she had called Clinton "a pot-smoking, draft-dodging fornicator." Instead, as she later explained to President Bush, she had called him a "prevaricator," which she told the audience was an acceptable way of calling him a "liar."

"Poppy Bush . . . called me from Air Force One, because the White House had fired me and he called me to un-fire me," Matalin said. "And he said, 'Keep fighting but just clean it up a little bit.'"

Matalin suggested that this incident pales in comparison to the language candidates and campaigns use today, but the entire tenor of American politics has also changed since 1992. Americans today "speak in different tongues, and we read different papers, and we get different news sources, and we're increasingly clustered." If there was ever a time when the country needed nobility injected into politics, it's today, she said.

She continued, "I am so grateful that we did politics when we did it, with the people for whom we served," she said. "It was an honor. It was a privilege. It was noble."

"Every day [President Bush] would say, 'Duty, honor, country.' You can't say that now. That's not 'woke,'" she added.

The discussion then shifted to the historic importance of the upcoming 2020 election, with Carville predicting that the United States could not withstand another four years with Donald Trump as president. The future of our nation, Carville said, lies in the hands of the voters of the Democratic primaries. Carville warned that although Democrats are in

agreement about their strong passion to boot Trump from the White House, they risk a Trump reelection if they select a candidate who is too far to the left.

“Literally, the country can’t take another four years of this,” Carville said.

Matalin responded that “the country can’t take it anymore” is not going to be a successful message for Democrats. With record low employment rates and economic gains across the country, Trump has a good record on which to run.

Carville then used the elections in Great Britain as a “canary-in-the-mineshaft” warning and predicted that Boris Johnson would win, which he did days later.

“Boris Johnson doesn’t know what he’s doing, they don’t like him there, and he can’t even comb his hair,” Carville said. “But, he is going to win, because Jeremy Corbyn has made himself totally unacceptable with all this goofy left-wing stuff.”

As a result, he said, it really matters who the Democrats nominate as a presidential candidate, because Trump can win despite his problematic favorability ratings. “I literally believe that our future, in a large part, rests with Democratic primary voters who are heavily older, African Americans, union members, or college-educated.”

Matalin chimed in and suggested that Democrats are again stuck between their loathing of Trump and their collective desire to elect someone to promote the policies they like. She recalled in 2016 when Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton spent 25% of her campaign “war chest” on matters related to policy and 75% attacking Trump’s character.

“It’s a Catch-22,” Matalin said. “I don’t know what their (Democrats’) message is—just hating Trump or just trying to beat Trump. With what? You have to beat him with something.”

Carville agreed that as of December 9, the Democratic candidates “have not been good, so far” as they try to determine how far left primary voters want their party to veer in 2020. “What’s happening in the Democratic Party is uncertain and highly relevant to the future of the country,” he said. Carville believes that to win in November, Democrats need to select a more moderate candidate who can attract a broad spectrum of voters.

“If Biden came up and said, ‘I’ll pledge that 25% of my cabinet members will be Republicans,’ some kind of unity government just to get us off this, I’d be for it,” Carville said.

Matalin offered the candidacy of Louisiana Governor John Bel Edwards as a good example of how a Democrat with moderate policy positions can attract voters in Republican states. In November, she said, Edwards won reelection even after Donald Trump held large rallies in the state to campaign against him.

Matalin pointed out that Edwards is pro-life, pro-gun, and pro-military and that he balanced the budget and supported education. Not all these policies are traditionally

supported by Democrats, but this made him an attractive candidate for Republicans, including Trump supporters.

“And you know what the voters said?” she said. “Yeah, we like Trump, but he was wrong on this.’ And John Bel could show results for all of this.”

One region of the country where Democrats need such a results-oriented approach is rural America, Carville said. That’s because 18% of the U.S. population live in rural states and are responsible for electing 52 U.S. senators. According to Carville, Democrats should continue to court young, urban, and diverse populations, but they should also double down on rural America. “You have to try to be a majoritarian political party,” Carville said.

Wrapping up the discussion, Carville, who lives in New Orleans with Matalin, gave a shout out to Houston for accepting so many refugees from his city in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. “Every New Orleanian has to come here and say the same three words: thank you, Houston.”

Carville, known for his brazen and obstreperous personality, also paid Baker a compliment: “There are only three people that I’ve ever met that intimidated me: Barbara Bush, George Mitchell, and Jim Baker. I literally have been a pretty loosey-goosey guy, but those are three people that you’re never loosey-goosey around.”

Carville ended the discussion with a message for students in the audience: “You should always strive to be the dumbest person in the room. If you’re ever in a room and you’re the smartest person in it, get the hell out. There’s nothing for you to learn.”

He continued by saying, “In the past six weeks, I’ve been to the Yale Political Union, the Oxford debating society, and the Baker Institute at Rice. There’s no danger I’m not the dumbest person in the room.”

It appeared that few, if any, in the room believed Carville’s observation about himself.

Panel III: The Democratic Party Nomination Process and the Four Early Primary and Caucus States

The third panel provided a broad overview of the Democratic Party nomination process followed by a detailed analysis of the dynamics and current state of play in the four early caucus and primary states: Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada, and South Carolina.

The first panelist was Josh Putnam, a political science Ph.D. and the founder and administrator of *FrontloadingHQ*, a website that covers national politics, presidential elections, and the rules of the Democratic and Republican nomination processes. He presented, “The Democratic Party Nomination Process: From Iowa to Milwaukee.” O. Kay Henderson, the news director for Radio Iowa, followed with her unique insights about the caucus in Iowa in her presentation, “Iowa: The First-in-the-Nation Presidential Caucus.”

The third panelist was Neil Levesque, the executive director of the New Hampshire Institute of Politics at Saint Anselm College, who presented on “New Hampshire: The First-in-the-Nation Presidential Primary.” Next, Jon Ralston, an editor of *The Nevada Independent*, presented “Nevada: The Forgotten Early Presidential Primary and Caucus State.” Lastly, David Woodard, the Thurmond Professor of Political Science at Clemson University, concluded with his views on South Carolina in his presentation, “South Carolina: The First-in-the-South Presidential Primary.” Mark P. Jones, the Baker Institute’s Political Science Fellow and a co-director of the Presidential Elections Program, served as the moderator.

Josh Putnam: The Democratic Party Nomination Process—From Iowa to Milwaukee

In addition to providing a broad overview of the Democratic Party’s 2020 nomination process, Josh Putnam highlighted three major issues relevant to the process.

First, Putnam noted that during the 2016 Democratic Party primary battle between Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders, Sanders’ campaign registered strident complaints about the role of superdelegates and the reality that an overwhelming majority of them had lined up behind Clinton from the very beginning. Superdelegates are elected officials and Democratic Party leaders who by virtue of their position are automatically seated at the Democratic National Convention. In 2016, the superdelegates enjoyed the same voting rights as other delegates who had been chosen through the democratic process of either a primary or a caucus.

Following the 2016 controversy, the Democratic Party’s Unity Reform Commission adopted a modest, yet important, change. Superdelegates would still exist in 2020, but they would only be allowed to vote at the Democratic National Convention if a candidate failed to obtain the support of an absolute majority of the elected delegates in the first round of voting.

Second, the calendar in 2020 is notably more front-loaded than in the past. By the time the clock strikes midnight on the March 3 Super Tuesday primary, approximately 40% of delegates will have been allocated, with this number rising to 67% by the end of March and 85% by the end of April.

Third, Putnam threw cold water on an issue he considers to be overheated talk regarding the possibility of a contested convention, which could occur if none of the candidates arrive at the convention with the absolute majority of delegates needed to win on the first vote. Putnam is skeptical about the occurrence of a contested convention because of the presence of a very high vote threshold that candidates must cross in order to be eligible to receive delegates. That threshold was established under the Democratic Party’s proportional distribution of delegates at the state and district levels. Any candidate that does not win at least 15% of the vote at the state-level is ineligible to receive any state-level delegates, and any delegate that does not win at least 15% of the vote in a district (either a congressional district or another legislative district, where a majority of delegates are allocated) is ineligible to receive any delegates from that district. This majoritarian feature of the Democratic Party’s rules favors the more popular candidates and increases the

probability of a candidate garnering an absolute majority of the delegates before the primary and caucus season ends in early June.

O. Kay Henderson: Iowa—The First-in-the-Nation Presidential Caucus

The second presentation by O. Kay Henderson examined Iowa and its first-in-the-nation caucus that will take place on February 3. Henderson detailed five key things to know about the Iowa caucus.

First, Henderson highlighted that the level of political intensity among Iowans is sky high. Furthermore, as of mid-December there were already 1000 paid organizers working for different campaigns in the state.

Second, Henderson described how there is a strong desire among Iowans to pick a winner. In particular, Iowans are attracted to candidates who they believe look presidential.

Third, according to Henderson, Iowans like a fresh face. In the 1988 Democratic primary, the fresh face was Missouri Congressman Dick Gephardt. In the 1996 Republican primary, it was Kansas Senator Bob Dole, and in the 2008 Democratic primary, it was Illinois Senator Barack Obama. In 2020, that fresh face could be former South Bend Mayor Pete Buttigieg.

Fourth, Henderson explained that Iowans like candidates from neighboring states. As a result, candidates from neighboring states have an advantage over the rivals from far off states such as Delaware, Massachusetts, and Vermont. In 2020, the “neighbor” candidate is Senator Amy Klobuchar from Minnesota, directly to the north of Iowa. Since 2013, Klobuchar has been employing a stock line when in Iowa, saying that she can see Iowa from her porch. In addition to appealing to Iowans as a neighbor, Klobuchar’s moderate policy positions are also in line with the policy preferences of a large number of Iowa Democrats.

Henderson’s fifth point was that Iowa caucus can be unpredictable. The state of play in December often does not predict what will happen on the night of the caucus. Henderson discussed “flip the switch” events in past caucus cycles when candidates who were languishing in the Iowa polls suddenly vaulted into relevance. As an example, she pointed to Barack Obama in December 2007 when his “flip the switch” moment involved Oprah Winfrey joining him on the campaign trail and declaring that “He’s the one.”

Neil Levesque: New Hampshire—The First-in-the-Nation Presidential Primary

The third presentation shifted attention towards the east where eight days after the Iowa caucus, New Hampshire will hold its first-in-the-nation presidential primary on February 11.

The New Hampshire electorate has roughly equal numbers of registered Republicans (294,000) and Democrats (278,000), with the plurality of New Hampshire residents falling in the category of “undeclared” because they are not registered under either major party. Democrats and undeclared (i.e., independent) voters are eligible to vote in the Democratic primary.

In the last Democratic presidential primary in 2016, Bernie Sanders handily defeated Hillary Clinton, 60% to 38%. In 2020, Levesque does not expect any candidate to win more than 50% of the vote. As of December, he believes that Joe Biden, Pete Buttigieg, Bernie Sanders, and Elizabeth Warren all have a realistic prospect of finishing first in New Hampshire.

Levesque concluded by charting out pathways to victory in New Hampshire for the four viable candidates.

For Biden, the key to victory will be to maintain his electability advantage and to convince voters to be pragmatic and to sacrifice some of their policy preferences for the larger goal of defeating Donald Trump in November of 2020.

For Buttigieg, his pathway to victory is to demonstrate durability and to present himself as a superior option for voters seeking a pragmatic and more centrist candidate.

For Bernie Sanders, his pathway to victory involves continuing to attract supporters of Elizabeth Warren and weakening the credibility of Biden's electability argument.

Warren's pathway involves both countering the argument that she does not provide the Democratic Party with a good chance of defeating Trump (and thus, neutralizing her electability question) as well as convincing her supporters to stay with her despite their potential support for rival candidates, particularly Sanders.

Jon Ralston: Nevada—The Forgotten Early Presidential Primary and Caucus State

In the fourth presentation, Jon Ralston provided an overview of the February 22 Nevada Democratic caucus and the current state of play in "The Silver State." He reminded the audience that contrary to frequent statements in the media and elsewhere, Nevada's caucus takes place before the South Carolina primary, rather than after.

Ralston began his presentation by pointing out that in contrast to Iowa and New Hampshire, two states with overwhelmingly white populations, Nevada is the first diverse state to vote. Anglos account for 90% of Iowa registered voters and 94% of New Hampshire registered voters. In contrast, Anglos account for only 67% of Nevada registered voters, while Latinos represent 17%, African Americans 9%, and Asian Americans 5%. Together, minorities comprise a third of the voting public in Nevada and an even higher share of the Democratic caucus electorate.

Ralston's description of Nevada's geography divided the state into three regions. The first is Las Vegas and Clark County, which forms the core. The second region is the Reno-Sparks metro area, and the third region includes 15 rural counties. Three out of every four Nevadans live in Clark County, and similarly about 75% of the state's 600,000 Democrats live there. As a result, when the presidential candidates go to Nevada, they spend most of their time in Clark County. Simply put, it is extremely difficult to do well in Clark County and lose the state, or vice versa.

According to Ralston, Nevada owes its third-in-the-nation status primarily to former Senate Majority leader Harry Reid (D-Nevada), who used his substantial power and influence in 2007 to convert Nevada into one of the privileged early primary and caucus states.

Finally, Ralston touched on the 2020 nomination process. According to Ralston, the endorsement of the Culinary Workers Union, which represents around 60,000 Nevada workers (including those in the casino industry) and has tremendous power in Democratic politics, will be critical. All of the credible candidates are working hard to obtain the union's endorsement.

In terms of statewide organization, Elizabeth Warren and Pete Buttigieg had the best ground games in Nevada, at the time of this conference. That said, Ralston highlighted changes in the caucus rules that will make voting easier and hence logistical advantages less salient (though still important), including moving from a single caucus day of voting to allowing four days of early voting prior to the actual day the caucus will be formally held.

David Woodard: South Carolina—The First-in-the-South Presidential Primary

In the last panel presentation, David Woodard discussed the fourth and final early primary and caucus state, South Carolina. Woodard highlighted several important aspects of the “Palmetto State’s” Democratic primary process that will be crucial to understanding the likelihood of victory by the members of the currently fragmented Democratic field.

First, African Americans constitute around 27% of South Carolina registered voters and between 55% and 60% of Democratic primary voters in South Carolina. As a result, it is next to impossible to win the Democratic primary in South Carolina without substantial support from African Americans.

Second, South Carolina is an open primary state, with Democrats having a long history of voting in the Republican primary and a strong potential for Republicans to turn out to vote in the Democratic primary in 2020. Woodard noted that President Donald Trump is not especially popular in South Carolina, suggesting some South Carolina Republicans may want a palatable option on the Democratic side of the ballot in the general election. As a result, some Republicans may participate in the Democratic primary to vote for a candidate who is closest to them ideologically, such as Joe Biden. In contrast, other South Carolina Republicans could behave more strategically by casting a ballot for the Democratic candidate they believe Donald Trump would have the best chance of defeating in November of 2020, such as Bernie Sanders or Elizabeth Warren.

As of the middle of December, Woodard's view of the state of play in South Carolina was that Biden was the heavy favorite, enjoying substantially more support among likely primary voters than any of his Democratic rivals. While South Carolina Democratic voters are not especially enthusiastic in their support for Biden, Biden provides them with a “safe choice,” and for many that is good enough.

Woodard concluded by reminding the audience that they should be aware of South Carolina's eccentric nature and the potential for them to surprise us on February 29. The most recent example of this eccentric behavior took place in 2012, when Mitt Romney was the Republican frontrunner and was expected to cruise to victory in the South Carolina Republican primary. However, after a successful debate performance in Myrtle Beach, Newt Gingrich's support surged during the final days of the campaign, with Gingrich handily defeating Romney 40% to 28%.

Panel IV: The 2020 Election

The fourth panel was an open discussion about the upcoming 2020 presidential election. Republican political consultant Karl Rove posed questions to the four panelists, who came from diverse professional and political backgrounds. The panel included Karen Tumulty, a columnist for the *Washington Post*; John Anzalone, a Democratic political consultant and partner at ALG Research; Jason Johnson, a Republican political consultant and the owner of J2 Strategies; and Lisa Lerer, a reporter at *The New York Times*.

Rove opened the discussion by reviewing Tumulty's "theory of the case" for political candidates. A week earlier, when Kamala Harris dropped out of the Democratic presidential primary, Tumulty opined that Harris did not have an overriding "theory of the case" that told voters who she was and how she could win the election.

"So," Rove began the questioning, "What is the Trump path to victory? What is the 'theory of his case' for a winning campaign in 2020?"

All four panelists reflexively answered that President Trump's campaign should focus on the economic accomplishments of his first term in office. With wages up and unemployment down, he has a tailor-made message that can unify voters who base their choice on pocketbook issues. "[Trump's campaign is] going to push the economy – like, don't mess it up, America," Tumulty said.

Ordinarily, such an approach is effective. Conventional political wisdom indicates that the approval rating of a president with rosy economic conditions should be above 50%. After all, as James Carville noted in 1992, "It's the economy, stupid!" Anzalone agreed that the Trump campaign does have the ability to spin such a positive message, noting that at the close of the 2016 election, Trump's campaign had great commercials focused on the economy. "They were like Ford F-150 commercials – really good," he said.

However, approval for Trump remains below 45%, an indication, Rove said, that there is something fundamentally different about the relationship between the economy and the 2020 election. As a result, each panelist was quick to note that a big question facing Trump is whether he can keep his positive economic message front and center.

Instead, they predicted, Trump will continue his divide-and-conquer approach to ratchet up support among the base that helped elect him in 2016. Lerer and Johnson

agreed that impeachment will be a rallying cry for Republicans as will Trump's trademark assault on opponents.

"His 'theory of the case' is fear, destruction, rape, and pillage," Anzalone said. "He's not going to change his colors."

The panelists agreed that a major Trump asset is his ability to define issues and opponents. Lerer observed that the president can introduce heated politics into all kind of institutions, such as the NFL debate about kneeling during the National Anthem. According to Lerer, people are voting on more cultural kinds of issues, and Donald Trump has ignited these flashpoints in American life such as race and gender. "He has an uncanny ability to do that," she said.

"There are many things that Donald Trump is very talented at," Johnson said. "But in my opinion, at the top of the list is taking any mistake or any weakness of his opponent and turning it to his advantage. I mean, if you stub your toe, he'll convince the voters you need your foot amputated and then turn around and brand you as a cripple."

Rove then questioned the panelists about the "theory of the case" that can help the eventual Democratic nominee win the election. "What does the winning Democrat campaign have to look like next year?" Rove asked.

Anzalone and Tumulty said that Democrats should appeal to voters who have grown weary of the national anxiety that has arisen since 2016. The current political environment is reminiscent of the post-Watergate election of 1976, Anzalone said. "The voting electorate is exhausted," he added. "They want their lives back."

With that in mind, Tumulty said that the Democratic candidate should consider taking a page from the 2012 reelection playbook of Barack Obama, who often used the phrase "Break the Fever" to remind voters that he wanted to end the rapid bipartisan infighting that was dividing the country. "The 'theory of their case' should be: 'Let's get back to normal,'" she said.

Lerer countered that while one segment of the Democratic electorate certainly wants the country to return to normal, another segment is looking for the type of big structural changes that Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren are proposing. For them, she said, there is no going back to normal. "Where the party goes is being discussed in the primaries right now, and we're going to see how it ends up," she said.

Rove dug further into the progressive-moderate split defining the 2020 Democratic primary, pointing out that in a recent article Lerer had written, Obama was reported to have questioned the wisdom of the Democratic field veering to the left. Rove wondered if some Sanders and Warren supporters would abandon their party's candidate if someone else emerges as the party's nominee. "We could see a repeat of 2016 in which one out of every 12 Sanders' supporters supported Trump's election," Rove said.

Anzalone said he doubts that as many Democrats will either not vote or support Trump as did four years ago. But even if that happens, he said, “the intensity level of what is at stake will override any major group of people sitting on their hands.” Above all, the panelists said, the Democrats want to win the 2020 election, and they expect their candidate to benefit from a historic turnout in the general election.

“So far, what I hear about the ‘theory of the case’ for Democrats is: ‘We hate Trump and we’re going to turn out in record numbers to defeat [him],’” Rove said.

With such a large field of candidates, the Democrats may take a long time to determine their eventual candidate, the panelists agreed. Therefore, according to Anzalone, rather than focusing on the winner of the early primaries in Iowa and New Hampshire, as pundits traditionally do, it may be more instructive to look at the margins in those states, if the candidates remain closely bunched together. At that point, Nevada might become a battleground, and Super Tuesday will play an important role.

Tumulty and Lerer said Michael Bloomberg’s strategy as a late entry in the race is to spend a lot of money in key states on the chance that Biden falters after the first four states and limps into Super Tuesday out of money. The success of that strategy is uncertain. “But we could be in unprecedented times,” Lerer said. “He’s spending an unprecedented amount of money. So, I think it’s just really hard to know.”

Rove then asked about the impact of impeachment on the election for the White House. Johnson said that polling in swing states indicates that impeachment and removal from office has become less popular as the process has proceeded against Trump. That could portend another Electoral College victory for the president. “Overall, I think it’s yet another thing that President Trump uses to play into that narrative and [to] paint the Democrats into a corner of being extreme [and] not being rational, and [Trump] just turns it into a strength,” Johnson said.

Tumulty pointed out that at a roundtable of reporters earlier in the fall, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi indicated that Trump’s approval numbers won’t change, even though President Richard Nixon’s ratings dropped to about 25% during the Watergate scandal. We live in a different country, with people gathered in their own tribes, she said.

“If it was a purely political proposition for the House, the smart thing would have been to censure the guy and start talking about something else,” Tumulty said.

Anzalone agreed, adding that the down-ballot Democratic candidates can’t wait to put impeachment behind them and start talking about healthcare, salaries, education, deteriorating infrastructure, and other pressing needs. “The fact is,” he said, “we really want to get back to what worked in 2018. And I’m not saying that [focusing on impeachment] is a complete impediment, but it’s not a great message.”

Rove then noted that minority candidates Kamala Harris, Julian Castro, and Corey Booker (all of whom have since dropped out) have had trouble getting traction among voters and asked if the party would have a problem with voter turnout in the fall if all of the Democratic primary finalists are white.

“I think that this desire for Democrats to oust President Trump is so much greater than any internal divide within the party that this will overrule any feelings about diversity or representation or things like that,” Lerer said. “But I do think in the short term, it’s not a great look for Democrats, given how much they’ve leaned into this message that they are sort of the bastion of diversity in the Trump era,” and now they will end up having debates with an all-white, mostly male field.

Looking forward to the general election, Rove asked the panelists which voting groups each side should be worried about.

Lerer and Tumulty said that white women will be a key voting bloc. Tumulty said there has been a lot of movement inside the group. And with good reason, Lerer added.

“They don’t like the president’s tone, they don’t like the chaos—you know, all the things that we’ve been talking about,” Lerer said. “But they may like some of what he accomplished in the economy. They really fueled the Democrats’ wins in the House in 2018, and so where those white women go will be really crucial to watch.”

Anzalone agreed that white women will be key to success, particularly non-college-educated white women. Two other key blocs will be black men and rural Americans, he said. “Younger black men were a huge problem for Hillary Clinton in places like Philadelphia, in places like Milwaukee, and in places like Detroit,” he said. “I don’t want to call it a problem, but we haven’t figured that out.”

Rove questioned whether a booming economy would assist Trump in capturing a share of those key blocs, particularly black men.

“Absolutely, and specifically young African American men,” Johnson said, adding that the Trump campaign is making a concerted effort to attract those voters.

As for rural voters who supported Trump in 2016, the president’s trade policies have hurt the pocketbooks of many farmers who historically benefit from foreign sales. “Are they willing to give him a little bit of time to get it done?” Rove asked.

Lerer, Tumulty, and Anzalone said that despite the economic woes they are facing, rural Americans appear to be sticking with Trump. Some are giving his policies more time to work, while others have a cultural identification with the president and his party.

Democrats, Anzalone said, need to do the same job of reaching out to rural Americans as Republicans are doing with black voters. “It’s just showing that you give a damn about

small-town America,” Anzalone said. “Trump is trying to steal another three or four points away from African Americans or Latinos—we’re just trying to steal away three, four, five points away from rural America, because it adds up.”

Anticipating a close Electoral College battler, Rove asked the panelists to name a handful of battleground states that will join the “big blue” states of Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania that Trump won in 2016. “Where else are we going to be seeing a concentration of activity?”

Arizona and Georgia—two states with changing demographics that traditionally vote Republican—were mentioned as potential battleground states. Minnesota—a traditional Democratic state that has similar demographics to Wisconsin, which supported Trump in 2016—was also listed as a potential battleground state. According to the panelists, New Hampshire, which Trump lost by a narrow margin in 2016, could also see a high concentration of activity.

Rove closed by asking the panelists to forecast an unforeseen event that might cause the election to swing. He also asked them to name the potential Democratic nominee and eventual winner.

Lerer, Tumulty, and Johnson said that a gaffe or an internal campaign event likely won’t affect the race as it might have in past presidential elections. “I think it would have to be something really big, like an economic collapse, or a war, something huge,” Lerer said. Anzalone responded by suggesting that with the Democratic primary season yet to have started, the race will likely be decided by an internal event in one of the Democratic campaigns.

As for the Democratic nominee and eventual winner, Johnson predicted Biden and Trump, respectively. Anzalone predicted Biden and Biden. Tumulty and Lerer declined to respond.

Conference Participants

Honorary Chairs

James Carville is a political commentator, media personality, and lawyer who is a prominent figure in the Democratic Party. Carville gained national attention for his work as the lead strategist of the successful presidential campaign of President Bill Clinton, for which he was honored as the Campaign District Manager of the Year by the American Association of Political Consultants. Carville subsequently went on to serve as a senior political advisor to the president. Carville also worked as co-host of *CNN*'s "Crossfire," and he has appeared frequently on *CNN*'s "The Situation Room." In January 2017, Carville joined the faculty of Louisiana State University's Manship School of Mass Communication. He earned a bachelor's degree and a J.D. from Louisiana State University.

Mary Matalin is a political consultant known for her work with the Republican Party. Among her many roles and accomplishments, Matalin has served under President Ronald Reagan and made her mark as President George H.W. Bush's campaign director. More recently, she served as both an assistant to President George W. Bush and as an assistant and counselor to Vice President Dick Cheney, making her the first White House official to hold that double title. Matalin has been active in politics since college, starting at the grassroots level in local and statewide campaigns in her native Illinois. She has also made frequent television and radio appearances as a political commentator, securing a career in conservative media advocacy following decades of work in the GOP political trenches.

Participants

John Anzalone is a partner at ALG Research. He has over 25 years of polling experience and has polled for both presidential campaigns of Barack Obama and that of Hillary Clinton. Anzalone has also helped elect U.S. senators, governors and dozens of members of Congress. In 2018, he helped elect Governor Gretchen Whitmer of Michigan and Governor Steve Sisolak of Nevada. In 2016, he polled for North Carolina Governor Roy Cooper and the fight against the state's anti-LGBT laws. He also helped to reelect Louisiana Governor John Bel Edwards. During the 2018 midterms, Anzalone's firm helped flip five GOP congressional seats, as well as elect Sen. Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona. Prior to his polling career, Anzalone was a campaign operative and an Iowa staffer for Joe Biden's 1988 presidential campaign. He also worked for Democratic strategist James Carville on Sen. Frank Lautenberg's 1988 campaign. He began his political career as an aide to David Wilhelm at Citizens for Tax Justice and the AFL-CIO. He graduated from Kalamazoo College in Michigan.

John D. Arnold is a former hedge fund manager and natural gas trader. His firm, Centaurus Advisors, LLC, was a Houston-based hedge fund composed of former traders that specialized in trading energy products. Arnold announced his retirement from the hedge fund in 2012, and he now focuses on philanthropy through Arnold Ventures LLC, which focuses on evidence-based policy, research and advocacy in criminal justice, health, education, and public finance.

The Honorable James A. Baker, III, has held senior government positions under three U.S. presidents. He served President George H.W. Bush as the nation's 61st secretary of state from January 1989 through August 1992, a period when the United States confronted the unprecedented challenges and opportunities of the post-Cold War era. Baker served as the 67th secretary of the treasury from 1985 to 1988 under President Ronald Reagan. He served twice as White House chief of staff—from 1981 to 1985 under President Reagan and from 1992 to 1993 under President Bush. His record of public service began in 1975 as undersecretary of commerce to President Gerald Ford. Long active in American presidential politics, Baker led presidential campaigns for Presidents Ford, Reagan, and Bush over the course of five consecutive presidential elections between 1976 and 1992. In recent years, he has served with former Congressman Lee Hamilton as co-chairmen of the Iraq Study Group, with President Jimmy Carter as co-chairmen of the Commission on Federal Election Reform and with the late Secretary of State Warren Christopher as co-chairmen of the National War Powers Commission. A native Houstonian, Baker graduated from Princeton University in 1952 with a bachelor's degree in history. After two years of active duty as a lieutenant in the United States Marine Corps, he attended The University of Texas at Austin School of Law and received his J.D. with honors in 1957. Baker is a senior partner in the law firm of Baker Botts L.L.P. and the honorary chair of Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy.

Michael Dimock, Ph.D., is the president of Pew Research Center. A survey researcher and political scientist by training, he oversees the center's overall operations and research agenda, including research on politics, religion, demographics, media, technology, and international issues. Dimock has worked at Pew Research Center for more than a decade and was first hired in 2000 by the center's founding director, Andrew Kohut. He became the associate director for research in 2004 and then succeeded Kohut as director of the center's political polling unit in 2012. He has been the co-author of several of the center's landmark research reports, including its studies of long-term trends in American political and social values and its polling reports from the last several presidential cycles. In 2014, Dimock oversaw the execution and analysis of the largest U.S. political survey that Pew Research Center has conducted, an in-depth examination of the nature and scope of political polarization within the American public. Dimock earned a Ph.D. in political science from the University of California, San Diego, and a bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Houston.

The Honorable Edward P. Djerejian's Foreign Service career spanned eight U.S. administrations, from John F. Kennedy to William J. Clinton. Prior to his nomination as U.S. ambassador to Israel, he was assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs in both the George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton administrations. He was previously the U.S. ambassador to the Syrian Arab Republic. He also served as special assistant to President Ronald Reagan and as deputy press secretary for foreign affairs in the White House. Following his retirement from government service, Djerejian became the director of Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy. He is the author of *Danger and Opportunity: An American Ambassador's Journey Through the Middle East*. He has been awarded the Presidential Distinguished Service Award; the Department of State's Distinguished Honor Award; the

Ellis Island Medal of Honor; the Anti-Defamation League's Moral Statesman Award; the Award for Humanitarian Diplomacy from Netanya Academic College in Israel; the National Order of the Cedar, bestowed by President Émile Lahoud of Lebanon; the Order of Ouissam Alaouite, bestowed by King Mohammed VI of Morocco; and the Order of Honor, bestowed by President Serzh Sargsyan of Armenia. He is also a recipient of the Association of Rice Alumni's Gold Medal for his service to Rice University. Djerejian is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and was a member of the board of trustees of the Carnegie Corporation of New York from 2011 to 2019.

The Honorable Edward M. Emmet served from 2007–2019 as the county judge of Harris County, Texas. Emmett is currently a professor of the practice at Rice University and a senior fellow at Rice's Kinder Institute for Urban Research. A member of the Texas House of Representatives from 1979 to 1987, Emmett was chairman of the Committee on Energy, a member of the Transportation Committee, and he represented the state on numerous national committees relating to energy and transportation policy. Emmett has been awarded numerous accolades in his career, including being named the Transportation Person of the Year by Transportation Clubs International in 2005, receiving the Presidential "Call to Service" Award from President George W. Bush in 2008, and receiving the 2009 Distinguished Public Service Award from the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at The University of Texas. In 2011, Emmett was named a distinguished alumnus of Rice University, having graduated in 1971 with a bachelor's degree in economics. He also earned a master's degree in public affairs from The University of Texas at Austin in 1974.

Lisa Falkenberg is the editor of opinion for the *Houston Chronicle*. A Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist with more than 20 years' experience, Falkenberg leads the editorial board and the paper's opinion and outlook sections, including letters, op-eds and Gray Matters. For more than a decade, she wrote a metro column at the *Chronicle* that explored a range of topics, including education, criminal justice and state, local and national politics. In 2015, Falkenberg was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for commentary, as well as the American Society of News Editors' Mike Royko Award for Commentary/Column Writing for a series that exposed a wrongful conviction in a death case and led Texas lawmakers to reform the grand jury system. She was also a Pulitzer finalist in 2014. Falkenberg earned a bachelor's degree from The University of Texas at Austin.

Stephen Hawkins is the director of research at More in Common, where he has led studies on polarization and division in the U.S. and across Europe. Hawkins has a background in measuring and advising on public opinion for political candidates, Fortune 100 companies like Microsoft and Ford, and public sector organizations like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the UN Refugee Agency. He earned a master's degree in public policy from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, and he is curious about how beliefs and ideology shape people's experiences of the world.

O. Kay Henderson is the news director and founding member of Radio Iowa, a radio news network headquartered in Des Moines. She has been with Radio Iowa since 1987, and she has served as its news director since 1994. Henderson is also a featured reporter and commentator on Iowa Public Television's "Iowa Press," and she was the recipient of the Jack Shelley Award in 2002. During college, Henderson served as a statehouse correspondent for WOI-AM, the NPR affiliate in Ames. She graduated from Iowa State University in 1987.

Jason Johnson is the owner of J2 Strategies, which provides turnkey campaign and political consulting solutions to Republican candidates and officeholders. With 39 campaign victories, J2 Strategies has earned one of the most successful political win records in Texas. He previously worked as the chief strategist for Ted Cruz's 2016 presidential campaign. Johnson also served as campaign manager for Greg Abbott's attorney general campaign, and then as chief of staff for Attorney General Abbott. He graduated from Texas A&M University with a degree in agriculture development.

Lisa Lerer is a reporter at *The New York Times*, covering campaigns, elections and political power. Before joining *The Times*, she was a national political writer at *The Associated Press*, where she was a lead reporter on the 2016 presidential race. She previously reported for *Politico*, *Bloomberg News*, *Businessweek* and *The American Lawyer* magazine. A graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, Lerer was a Nieman fellow at Harvard University in 2017.

Neil Levesque currently serves as the executive director at the New Hampshire Institute of Politics at Saint Anselm College, which he joined in 2009. The institute's scope and exposure have grown substantially under his direction, and he regularly appears on news broadcasts and political programs. In addition to his role at the institute, Levesque spent some time as chief of staff for the president of Saint Anselm College, Steven R. DiSalvo. He handled many legal matters of the college and assisted the president in managing nearly 2,000 students and 675 employees while still directing the institute. Prior to his work at the institute, Levesque held a variety of leadership roles in politics and governance across New Hampshire. He began his career working for U.S. Rep. Charles Bass through 12 years of service and five successful elections. Levesque earned a bachelor's degree in political science from Wheaton College.

Jeff Lewis, Ph.D., is a professor in the department of political science at the University of California, Los Angeles. He currently serves as the president of the Society for Political Methodology. His research and teaching are in the areas of quantitative methodology, elections, direct democracy, California politics, and American politics. He earned a bachelor's degree in political science and economics from Wesleyan University and a Ph.D. in political science from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Jennifer L. Merolla, Ph.D., is a professor of political science at the University of California, Riverside. Her research focuses on how the political environment shapes individual attitudes and behavior across many domains, such as candidate evaluations during elections,

immigration policy attitudes, foreign policy attitudes, and support for democratic values and institutions. She is co-author of *Democracy at Risk: How Terrorist Threats Affect the Public* (University of Chicago Press, 2009). Her work has appeared in journals such as *Comparative Political Studies*, *Electoral Studies*, the *Journal of Politics*, *Perspectives on Politics*, *Political Behavior*, *Political Research Quarterly*, *Political Psychology*, and *Women, Politics, and Policy*. She earned a Ph.D. in political science from Duke University in 2003.

Josh Putnam, Ph.D., is the founder and administrator of *FrontloadingHQ*, a site that focuses on the presidential nomination process. He is also the founder of the elections consulting firm, FHQ Strategies, LLC. Putnam earned a master's degree and Ph.D. in political science from the University of Georgia, as well as a bachelor's degree in political science from the University of North Carolina.

Jon Ralston is an editor at *The Nevada Independent*, and he has been covering politics in Nevada for more than 30 years. His blog, "Ralston Reports," was founded in 2012 and is now hosted by *The Nevada Independent*. He has also written for the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* for 15 years. In 1999, Greenspun Media Group purchased his political newsletter, "The Ralston Report," and hired him as a columnist for the *Las Vegas Sun*, where his byline appeared until September 2012. He was also a columnist for the *Reno Gazette-Journal* from January 2015 until November 2016, when he left to start *The Indy*. He earned a bachelor's degree in English from Cornell University and a master's degree in journalism from the University of Michigan.

Karen Johnson Rove is the president and founder of Infrastructure Solutions, Inc. (ISI), a full-service government affairs firm in Austin that represents clients before U.S. Congress, the Texas legislature, and other federal and state agencies. ISI also provides strategic advice on business opportunities in the Texas transportation sector and on ballot initiatives and public information campaigns involving transportation issues. Rove played a key role in President George W. Bush's 2000 presidential campaign, and she worked closely with other members of the campaign staff on special projects. Rove graduated from Texas A&M University with a bachelor's degree in political science.

Karl Rove served as senior advisor to President George W. Bush from 2000 to 2007 and as deputy chief of staff from 2004 to 2007. At the White House, he oversaw the Offices of Strategic Initiatives, Political Affairs, Public Liaison and Intergovernmental Affairs and was deputy chief of staff for policy, coordinating the White House policymaking process. Before Rove became known as "the architect" of Bush's 2000 and 2004 presidential campaigns, he was president of Karl Rove + Company, an Austin-based public affairs firm that worked with more than 75 Republican gubernatorial and congressional candidates, as well as for nonpartisan causes and nonprofit groups. Rove writes a weekly op-ed for *The Wall Street Journal* and is a *Fox News* contributor. He is the author of two books — *The Triumph of William McKinley: Why the Election of 1896 Still Matters* (Simon & Schuster, 2016) and the *New York Times* bestseller *Courage and Consequence: My Life as a Conservative in the Fight* (Threshold Editions, 2010)—and is currently working on a third about presidential decision-making.

Daron Shaw, Ph.D., is a professor in the department of government of The University of Texas at Austin. Shaw previously worked on several political campaigns as a survey research analyst, and he also served as a strategist in the 2000 and 2004 presidential election campaigns. He is a co-author of *Unconventional Wisdom: Facts and Myths about American Voters* (Oxford University Press, 2008) and author of *The Race to 270: The Electoral College and the Campaign Strategies of 2000 and 2004* (University of Chicago Press, 2006). Shaw is a member of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, the National Election Studies Board of Overseers, and the editorial board for American Politics Research, and he serves on the national decision team for *Fox News* and the Annette Strauss Institute's advisory board.

Karen Tumulty is a columnist for *The Washington Post*. In her previous role as a national political correspondent for the newspaper, she received the Toner Prize for Excellence in Political Reporting. She joined *The Post* in 2010 from *Time* magazine, where she had held the same title. During her more than 15 years at *Time*, Tumulty wrote or co-wrote more than three dozen cover stories. She also held positions with *Time* as congressional correspondent and White House correspondent. Before joining *Time* in 1994, Tumulty spent 14 years at the *Los Angeles Times*, where she covered a wide variety of beats. During her time there, she reported on Congress, business, energy, and economics from Los Angeles, New York, and Washington, D.C. Tumulty began her career at the now-defunct San Antonio Light.

Lynn Vavreck, Ph.D., is the Marvin Hoffenberg Professor of American Politics and Public Policy at the University of California, Los Angeles. She is also a contributing columnist to "The Upshot" at *The New York Times* and a recipient of the Andrew F. Carnegie Prize in the Humanities and Social Sciences. Vavreck has authored five books, including *Identity Crisis: The 2016 Presidential Campaign and the Battle for the Meaning of America*, (Princeton University Press, 2018) and *The Gamble: Choice and Chance in the 2012 Presidential Election*, (Princeton University Press, 2013). Political consultants on both sides of the aisle frequently reference her work on political messaging in *The Message Matters: The Economy and Presidential Campaigns* (Princeton University Press, 2009). Her research has been supported by the National Science Foundation, and she has served on the advisory boards of both the British and American National Election Studies. She earned a Ph.D. in political science from the University of Rochester.

David Woodard, Ph.D., is the Thurmond Professor of Political Science at Clemson University. Prior to his arrival at Clemson in 1983, Woodard taught at Auburn University for two years. He is the author or co-author of seven books, including *The New Southern Politics* (Lynne Rienner, 2013) and *Ronald Reagan: A Biography* (Greenwood Biographies, 2012). In addition, he has worked as a political consultant for numerous Republican candidates, including Sens. Lindsey Graham and Jim DeMint of South Carolina, and Reps. Trey Gowdy, Jeff Duncan, and Gresham Barrett of South Carolina. Woodard received a Ph.D. in American politics from Vanderbilt University.

Conference Organizers

Mark P. Jones, Ph.D., is the fellow in political science at the Baker Institute, the Joseph D. Jamail Chair in Latin American Studies and a professor in the Department of Political Science at Rice University. Jones also serves as the faculty director of Rice's Master of Global Affairs program. He has received substantial financial support for this research, including grants from the National Science Foundation. He is a frequent contributor to Texas media outlets, and his research on the Texas Legislature has been widely cited in the media as well as by numerous political campaigns. Jones regularly advises U.S. government institutions on economic and political affairs in Argentina and has conducted research on public policy issues in Latin America and Texas for numerous international, national, and local organizations, including the Inter-American Development Bank, the United Nations Development Programme, the U.S. Department of Defense, the Texas Department of Agriculture, and the city of Houston. Jones received his doctorate from the University of Michigan and his bachelor's degree from Tulane University.

John B. Williams oversees the Baker Institute Presidential Elections Program. A national award-winning journalist and speechwriter, Williams has been a policy assistant to the Honorable James A. Baker, III, since July 2004. In that role, he has supported Secretary Baker's efforts to find solutions for a wide array of international and domestic challenges, including the Iraq Study Group, the Commission on Federal Election Reform, the National War Powers Commission, and the BP U.S. Refineries Independent Safety Review Panel. He also prepares speeches, op-eds and other written materials for Secretary Baker and is an employee of Baker Botts L.L.P. Williams had a long career reporting on governmental and political issues, serving as a political columnist and reporter in his prior job with the *Houston Chronicle*, where he focused on state and local news. He received a 1987 Penney-Missouri Journalism Award for a series of articles about a Mississippi investment banking firm that took advantage of small investors and a 2012 Cicero Speechwriting Award for "The Life and Legacy of Ronald Wilson Reagan." Williams received his bachelor's degrees in zoology and journalism from The University of Texas at Austin.