

Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS



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CONFERENCE REPORT

A PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION DURING THE TIME OF COVID-19

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“A Presidential Election During the Time of COVID-19”

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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. Experts who participate in the program examine 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.

As part of its activities, the program conducts biennial conferences on topics of high political and policy salience. These conferences are held in the year preceding and 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 unrivaled experience of the institute's honorary chair, Secretary James A. Baker, III, who played a leading role in 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 re-election 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.

Between December 1 and December 3, 2020, the Presidential Elections Program hosted its third conference, "A Presidential Election During the Time of COVID-19." Held virtually across three days, the conference brought together a diverse group of academics, campaign consultants, journalists, and other prominent individuals to review the dynamics and outcome of the 2020 presidential election. Veteran political consultants Stephanie Cutter, the deputy campaign manager for former President Barack Obama's 2012 re-election campaign, and Beth Myers, a senior advisor on Mitt Romney's 2012 campaign for president and a campaign manager for his 2008 presidential race, served as the conference's honorary co-chairs. This report summarizes the presentations and discussions of the many individuals who participated in the conference's five thematic panels as well as a moderated conversation featuring Cutter and Myers.

Panel I: What Happened with the Polls in 2020?

The first panel of the conference examined the performance of public opinion polls during the 2020 election cycle and featured three of the country's leading public opinion scholars: Lonna Atkeson of the University of New Mexico, Kenneth Goldstein of The University of San Francisco, and Daron Shaw of the University of Texas at Austin. Baker Institute fellow and Presidential Elections Program co-director Mark P. Jones served as the panel's moderator.

As the first presenter, Shaw discussed an inherent feature of national election polls: the closer a poll is conducted to the election date, the more accurate it will likely be—but it will never be perfectly accurate. He cited work by public opinion scholars Robert Erickson and Chris Wlezien showing that even the best election polls have average errors of around 1.5 percentage points when conducted a few days before an election. During the 2016 presidential election, the average poll had an error of 2.1 percentage points—not far from the historic average error for national public opinion polls.

Turning to the 2020 presidential election, Shaw presented data revealing that on election eve, an aggregation of prominent national polls was predicting the Democratic candidate, Joe Biden, would get 51.2% of the vote, while the Republican candidate, Donald Trump, would get 44.0%. In actuality, the final national vote results were 51.3% for Biden and 46.8% for Trump. The polls were essentially spot-on in regards to Biden's share of the national vote (underestimating it by 0.1%), Shaw said, but were notably off in terms of Trump's share, underestimating it by an average of 2.8 percentage points.

Shaw also highlighted the stark tendency of state-level polls to underestimate Trump's vote share. While state-level polls in only six of the 50 states and the District of Columbia under-forecasted Biden's popular vote in their respective state, Trump's popular vote was under-forecasted by state-level polls in 45 states. Thus, it is undeniable, Shaw said, that public opinion polls (on average)—at both the national and state levels—dramatically underestimated Trump's expected vote share.

Shaw continued, pointing out that the polls also consistently underestimated Trump's projected vote share in key battleground states. The state-level polls that experienced the largest errors (i.e., underestimated Trump's share of the vote by the largest margins) were in Wisconsin, Iowa, Ohio, Florida, and Michigan, with the smallest errors occurring in the projections for Georgia, Nevada, and Arizona. Florida was a particular mess, Shaw said. For the third straight presidential election in a row, the state-level polls in Florida significantly under-forecasted the Republican presidential candidate's share of the popular vote.

Shaw offered four potential explanations for the systematic under-forecasting of Trump's share of the vote in 2020. The first was partisan non-response, with Republicans/conservatives less likely to respond to surveys than Democrats/liberals. The second was that even when the correct share of Republicans was surveyed, they weren't representative of "Trump Republicans." The third potential explanation pointed to the existence of "shy" Trump voters—that is, voters who responded but did not want to admit they would be voting for Trump, instead saying they were unsure or would vote for a third-party candidate. The final explanation, related to voter turnout, was that pollsters underestimated the enthusiasm of Trump supporters and did not anticipate their high levels of participation.

Lonna Atkeson, the second presenter, reinforced Shaw's point regarding the tendency of the 2020 polls to accurately forecast Biden's share of the popular vote while systematically under-forecasting Trump's share at both the national and state levels.

Atkeson reviewed four possible explanations for these skewed results. The first was what she termed the "likely voter problem"—the challenge of accurately predicting who is going to turn out to vote and who is not. If pollsters underestimate the turnout of one candidate's supporters and/or overestimate that of another candidate, then the survey results (in terms of the projection of the valid vote) are going to be wrong.

The second potential explanation, which Shaw also noted, was the possibility of “shy” Trump voters—people who support Trump but are not willing to say so publicly. However, Atkeson found no indication of a notable proportion of “shy” Trump voters in the electorate, let alone enough to skew the results of public opinion polls.

Atkeson’s third possible explanation was the potential for late-deciders tilting disproportionately toward Trump, a trend that was detected in some states in 2016. Atkeson concluded, however, that there was little evidence that this occurred during the 2020 election cycle, given that after nearly four years of Trump in the White House, voters had very strong feelings about him one way or the other.

The fourth possible explanation, and the one Atkeson said best explains the failure of the 2020 election polls to accurately capture the true level of popular support for Donald Trump, was related to non-response. That is, Republican voters are significantly less likely to respond to surveys than are Democratic voters—in a way that weighting and other corrective mechanisms have difficulty accounting for. She linked this relatively recent phenomenon (dating to 2016) to Republican voters’ rising distrust of mainstream media, universities, and related institutions that they perceive as being biased against them.

Atkeson expressed her fear that the United States is entering an era where a respondent’s level of social trust is correlated with their willingness to participate in surveys. If this occurs, she said, it will be a very serious problem for the polling industry. After the 2016 failure of state-level polls, the polling industry invested considerable time, energy, and money correcting their 2020 polls to avoid having their projections undercut by non-response bias (among other things). But as Atkeson underscored, while the polling industry did try to make fixes in 2020, it ultimately failed. It’s a worrying trend not only for the entire industry, but also for those who depend on it—from politicians and interest groups, to the media, and even voters.

In the final presentation of the panel, Kenneth Goldstein argued that the 2020 public opinion polls, especially the state-level polls, were possibly even more skewed than Shaw and Atkeson claimed—particularly the higher quality media and university polls.

Goldstein highlighted the case of Wisconsin (his home for a decade while serving as a professor at the University of Wisconsin, Madison), where the final polls were conducted by the country’s most prestigious media outlets. Pollsters with large budgets had dramatic errors, even when they used gold-standard polling methodology. Conducted shortly before the election, the final polls by ABC News-*Washington Post*, NBC News-*Wall Street Journal*, Quinnipiac, and Fox News predicted a Biden margin of victory in Wisconsin that ranged from 8% (Fox News) to 17% (ABC News-*Washington Post*), with the NBC News-*Wall Street Journal* and Quinnipiac polls falling in the middle, projecting a Biden margin of victory of 10% and 11% respectively. Biden’s final margin of victory in Wisconsin was a narrow 0.63% (49.45% vs. 48.82%). Clearly the polling industry failed to predict how voters in “America’s Dairyland” would cast their votes, Goldstein noted.

Goldstein also offered his take on why the polling industry failed to accurately project the share of the presidential vote won by each candidate at the national and state levels in 2020. Undergirding this failure, Goldstein said, was the reality that polling experts did not have a very good handle on what the U.S. electorate looked like—including features like party affiliation, age, ethnicity/race, and even social class. In particular, Goldstein suggested that a key part of the issue stemmed from pollsters trying to predict what proportion of independents would turn out to vote and what proportion would stay home (which many do, compared to partisan Democrats and Republicans). Further, when independents did turn out to vote, it was difficult to predict what proportion would vote for the Democratic candidate versus the Republican candidate.

Goldstein linked the issue of biased non-response raised by Atkeson with his thoughts on the projection of voting behavior by independents. He emphasized that much of the error in the polling could be attributed to disproportional non-response by Republican-leaning independents, who either did not respond to surveys or indicated they might not turn out, but in the end *did* turn out in large numbers in support of Donald Trump.

Goldstein also pondered whether these polling errors, especially those committed by the country's leading media outlets, actually had an effect on the outcome of the 2020 election. His answer—they did not.

Goldstein concluded with two key questions that are likely on the minds of pollsters across the country: To what extent were the polling errors of 2016 and 2020 attributable to the unique candidacies of Donald Trump in each year? And to what extent do these errors reflect systematic changes that will continue to affect the polling industry long after Trump has left the main political stage? In all likelihood, we will have to wait until 2024, or potentially 2028, for the answers.

Panel II: COVID-19 and the 2020 Election Process

The second panel focused on perhaps the most unique aspect of the 2020 election process: that it was being conducted in the midst of what was far and away the worst pandemic to afflict the United States since the Spanish Flu of 1918. The panelists were three nationally renowned campaign consultants and academics: Zac Moffatt, CEO of Targeted Victory (a firm that works primarily with Republicans), Chuck Rocha, president and founder of Solidarity (a firm that works primarily with Democrats), and Mindy Romero, founder and director of the Center for Inclusive Democracy at the University of Southern California. The Honorable Jason Villalba, president of the Texas Hispanic Policy Foundation and a former Texas state representative from Dallas, served as the panel's moderator.

Moffatt began the panel by describing the kind of political consulting that was in existence before COVID-19 disrupted the election process in the spring of 2020. Moffatt traced the modern period of presidential campaign professionalization to the year 2008, when Democratic candidate Barack Obama opted to turn down public funding of his campaign. Obama's strategy, along with the successful outcome of his gambit, was followed by an

explosion in spending during the subsequent dozen years. Prior to COVID-19, virtually all of this additional money went to television ads, either sponsored by the campaigns themselves or by Super PACs supporting the candidates.

COVID-19 changed this approach and accelerated the shift toward digital media that had been increasingly, albeit slowly, underway during the past decade. It also heightened awareness within professionally run campaigns of the effectiveness of using social media, such as Twitter, Snapchat, and Facebook, to sway the outcome of elections. As campaigns have transitioned to social media and digital ad buys, Moffatt pointed out that some campaign consultants continued using their old campaign playbooks for these new forms of media. Others, meanwhile, threw away their old playbooks and wrote new ones designed specifically for this new medium of communication.

To highlight a difference between the old and new approaches, Moffatt discussed the length of advertisements. A staple of advertising for decades has been the traditional 30-second television commercial. Online, however, few people are willing to watch a 30-second video, and they move on to something else within seconds. According to Moffatt, a 15-second ad is likely to retain more viewers for the period of the entire ad. But the most effective online video ads last fewer than six seconds. Making such ads to maximize viewership requires changes to the underpinnings of the spot, the opening sequence, the color scheme, and other elements designed for the specific platform and audience.

Moffatt concluded with two observations. First, the greatest amount of digital innovation during the 2020 COVID-19 election cycle came from down-ballot campaigns. This stands in contrast to past election cycles when presidential campaigns represented the greatest sources of digital innovation. Second, digital advertising continued to provide political campaigns with considerably more “bang for the buck” than television advertising. Despite that, Moffatt said, too many political campaigns continue to follow out-of-date playbooks where television advertising remains king, to the detriment of their campaign’s success, or at least to the efficiency and effectiveness of their campaign’s expenditures.

In the second presentation, Chuck Rocha, who began his paid campaign work on Ann Richards’ 1990 Texas gubernatorial campaign and most recently worked on Bernie Sanders’ 2020 Democratic presidential primary campaign, highlighted three major effects of COVID-19 on Democratic Party campaigns during the 2020 election.

First, it took Democrats indoors and prevented them from doing what they love—grassroots activism and block walking. Although knocking on doors and block walking is not the only way to campaign, it is effective and impactful. Rocha estimated that many, if not most, of the races that Democratic candidates narrowly lost, were lost because of the absence of a robust field operation due to the pandemic.

Second, COVID-19 disproportionately affected Black and Latino communities and less-wealthy people more generally, due in large part to a lack of health care. Latinos were dying at a rate three times that of white people, and Black people at a rate that was two-

and-a-half times that of whites. As a result, there was considerably more COVID-19 turmoil within these communities of color. Many were more focused on survival rather than paying attention to campaign advertising or outreach, Rocha said.

Third, in Rocha's opinion, too many Democratic campaigns believed that they could run an effective campaign through Zoom. While such an approach may work well with some demographics, Rocha argued that Zoom campaigns do not work at all with Latinos. Democratic campaigns that followed this strategy did not do as well with Latino voters as they could have, he said.

Responding to a question from Jason Villalba, Rocha also discussed the impact of the relative absence of Latino political consultants in the political consulting industry. Rocha acknowledged that this lack of representation is present on both sides of the aisle, but his focus was primarily on the Democratic Party when he cited the following statistic: 69% of Texas school children are not white, but virtually all of the Democratic consultants in Texas are white. As a result, these consultants consistently misread the Latino community, often assuming that what works with hipsters in Dallas will also work with Mexicans in the Rio Grande Valley (located along the eastern end of the U.S.-Mexico border). Because of this, Rocha claimed, we should not be surprised, as most pundits were, by Donald Trump's over-performance in the Rio Grande Valley.

Looking ahead to the 2022 election cycle and beyond, Rocha offered advice for the Democratic Party. For the party to realize its full potential, he said, it must carry out a multi-layered, paid communication campaign that utilizes diverse modes including block walking and digital, television, radio, and direct mail advertising. Campaigns must also have a culturally competent team, Rocha said, which will require including more Latinos up and down the hierarchy of the campaign organizational chart. "The one thing I can guarantee you is that [Latinos] are never going to vote for you if you don't go ask them or tell them why," he concluded.

In the third presentation, Mindy Romero focused primarily on the increased use of mail ballots (also known as absentee ballots) during the 2020 election cycle. Their increased use was not only a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also part of a growing trend across the United States over the past decade, she said.

Prior to 2020, vote-by-mail was used by approximately one out of every four American voters. This use, however, varied considerably by state, with some states conducting all voting by mail, and others only allowing it if voters could provide one of a select number of excuses. For instance, in the 2016 presidential election in California—where it was very easy to vote by mail but, unlike states such as Oregon, in-person voting was still an option—more than half (58%) of all ballots cast were cast by mail.

Romero expressed support for vote-by-mail because it increases voter participation, but she warned against proposals that do away completely with in-person voting. Her research revealed that many first-time voters, young people, Latinos, and other people of color are

on average more likely to prefer in-person voting and to vote that way. It is thus important to provide these and other voters with safe in-person voting options, she said, even as states increase their use of mail ballots.

Romero also addressed the common critique heard before and after Election Day—that vote-by-mail is more vulnerable to manipulation than in-person voting. She pointed out how some Trump supporters have even claimed that fraudulent mail ballots in several states “stole” the 2020 election from the former president. Romero noted that, on the one hand, researchers consistently stated there was no evidence of mail voting benefitting one party over the other. But on the other hand, Trump and many of his supporters ignored this and declared that mail ballots benefited Democrats. Many Republicans latched onto the latter message instead of the former from the experts. In turn, while there was no significant evidence of mail-ballot fraud, a sizable group of Americans now believes there was fraud. Romero argued that this has substantially damaged trust in the country’s electoral process and could have a corroding effect on our democracy.

Finally, in response to a question from moderator Jason Villalba, Romero commented on the future of mail voting in the post-COVID era. She believes that while election officials and candidates from both parties have a high degree of trust and confidence in the mail-ballot process, a substantial portion of the American public does not. As a result, the future of vote-by-mail—in Republican-controlled states in particular—will hinge on whether Republican-elected and -appointed officials make an effort to counter the misinformation that has undermined public trust. But, she said, it is very possible that GOP officials instead cater to the demands of their party base and either place greater restrictions on the use of mail ballots or, at minimum, halt the expansion of their use.

Panel III: Another 2000?

Throughout recent U.S. history, the losing presidential candidate has traditionally conceded within a few hours after the polls were closed and the election outcome was clear. But that trend started to change in 2000, when Al Gore waited 37 days to concede after the U.S. Supreme Court rendered a decision that finalized his 537-vote loss in Florida and gave the election to George W. Bush. Four years later in 2004, John Kerry waited until almost noon to concede a close race to President Bush after he determined he had no legal recourse in Ohio. And in 2020, Donald Trump did not formally concede and continued to claim he was cheated in his loss to Joe Biden.

During this panel discussion, attorneys with the Bush and Gore legal teams compared what happened in the immediate aftermath of the contentious 2020 election to the so-called “Florida Recount” legal battle in 2000. Richard Pildes, the Sudler Family Professor of Constitutional Law at New York University School of Law, moderated the discussion between Ben Ginsburg of the Bush legal team and Mitchell Berger of the Gore legal team.

One of the biggest differences between 2000 and 2020, Pildes and the panelists agreed, was that the level of political friction during the 2020 election was much greater than during the 2000 election. Or as Pildes noted, there was a “more dignified process back then.”

“It's hard to remember this, but a large part of the country did not think at that time that there was an enormous difference between George W. Bush and Al Gore,” Pildes said. “I mean, the most intense partisans did. But the country was not anywhere like what it has become in terms of polarization.”

“There wasn't the sense that the election was existential in the way that many people feel ... that if the other side wins, the country will never be the same again.”

Ginsburg and Berger concurred, with each noting that there was a collegiality shared among attorneys on both sides in 2000, even as they fought a tough legal battle. Ginsburg recalled that he often went out for drinks with Gore's Democratic attorneys. Berger said that attorneys for both sides—Ted Olsen with Bush and David Boise with Gore—ended up becoming close friends and later litigated other legal cases together.

“It [is] pretty improbable in my mind that Rudy Giuliani [with the Trump legal team] and Bob Bauer [with the Biden legal team] are going to be bending elbows anytime soon,” Ginsburg said.

Although the 2000 Florida recount was bitter, both the Bush and Gore sides respected the process, Berger and Ginsburg said. “It was handled as [former U.S. Secretary of State] Warren Christopher asked us to handle it—like the world's greatest democracy was having an issue about who should be its next president,” Berger stated.

One example of the restraint demonstrated was when the Gore legal team refused to join a lawsuit to disqualify thousands of absentee ballots in Seminole and Martin Counties that may not have been correctly processed by election officials. Gore told his attorneys not to pursue the case because he didn't want to disqualify votes, Berger explained. “Partisans do what they do, but it's up to leaders to make sure that they respect the process.”

“To flesh that out a little bit, that was an attempt to disenfranchise 25,000 absentee votes [in 2000] because of an election official's error with the applications to get ballots,” Ginsburg noted. “Those are precisely the votes that the Trump campaign is trying to throw out in 2020 with absentee votes. Not the fault of the voters involved, but because there was a process error involving elections officials.”

One reason for the greater civility in 2000, they noted, was that Bush and Gore had parallel histories in Washington—both politically and personally. Both had long public careers before running for president, and both had family members in public office too—Bush's father served as president from 1989 to 1993, and Gore's father was previously a U.S. senator. As a result, the post-election legal battle in 2000 didn't have the same degree of nastiness compared to the 2020 election.

In 2020, meanwhile, the two candidates were starkly different. Joe Biden was a career politician, while Trump was a businessman who never held public office. The difference in Trump's approach was evident, Ginsburg stated.

"In 2000 there was no candidate who said, 'Let's stop counting the votes before they're all counted,'" Ginsburg continued. "There was one count of the votes [in 2000], and then, we sort of danced over what should be recounted and how. It was always clear that [2000] was a breathtakingly close election, and things would get a little bit wild. But there was nothing like this year where someone said, 'Let's not count the absentee ballots because we don't kind of like them.'"

In the end, Al Gore conceded in 2000 after losing Florida by 537 votes in a contentious race. Trump, on the other hand, did not concede despite losing by a much greater margin than Gore did 20 years earlier.

"Al Gore gave an incredibly gracious ... concession speech when the recount was over," Ginsburg said, adding that this "was in the best interest of the country."

Ginsburg continued, noting that "Donald Trump, who lost by many hundreds of thousands of votes, can't bring himself to do that, yet. And so, that's a real vivid example of the differences between the two elections."

Both Ginsburg and Berger said that taking part in their respective party's legal battle in 2000 was an incredibly difficult and intense chore, one that came after several confusing hours on election night during which Gore made a concession call to Bush only to rescind it later. By the next morning, both sides were gearing up for what became a historic, 36-day legal battle that was ultimately decided by the nation's highest court. Ginsburg and Berger said that attorneys and party operatives immediately began streaming into different parts of Florida.

"In all the recounts I've done over the years, never is anyone really prepared for the reality of 'Holy cow, it's really happening,'" Ginsburg said. "And that was that moment."

"To be able to handle the logistics to get that done was a real tribute to the professionalism of the folks in the campaign," Ginsburg added.

By the time the polls had closed, Berger said that he and other attorneys for the Gore campaign had already been hard at work for almost 12 hours trying to sort out voting problems in several south Florida counties that traditionally voted for Democrats. Particularly troubling for the Gore campaign were the butterfly ballots that accounted for an unusually high number of votes for Reform Party candidate Pat Buchanan. Unable to correct the problem on Election Day, the butterfly ballots became one focus of the subsequent recount in Palm Beach and three other counties.

"I think that initially, we thought it would be over quickly, and it took till probably the weekend to recognize exactly how long it could be and how it could drag out," Ginsburg said.

Eventually, on December 12, the U.S. Supreme Court stopped a recount that had been ordered by the Florida Supreme Court. The ruling essentially gave the election to Bush.

Twenty years later, Pildes noted that the political pressure is much greater on elections officials than it was during the Bush-Gore campaign. Many of those officials, he said, have jobs that are fairly ministerial in function. “Is there a way we can protect against that going forward?” Pildes asked. “Should we change the structure?”

Reforming state laws to make it clear that the certification process is a ministerial duty could help, Ginsburg responded. “But I also think you need to wait a little bit of time to review the current situation, because a lot of the problems were caused by one actor acting in a way that no presidential candidate has acted before,” he continued. “So, I think you've got to be careful about overcorrecting and creating a cure that's worse than the disease for this.”

Berger added that it is impossible to legislate good behavior. If somebody wishes to take advantage of some part of the system, they are going to find a way to do that. But bigger, structural changes are needed. The Electoral College, for example, should be abolished, he said.

“If you want to know where we can start, we could start by passing a constitutional amendment that every citizen can vote for president,” Berger stated. “That would be a good start. And then, we can determine where we go from there.”

“All the legalisms are occurring because of what I call the ‘appendicitis of American democracy’—the Electoral College. It needs to be removed before it bursts,” Berger concluded. “These legalisms are all created because of that institution.”

Moderated Conversation with the Co-Chairs

In addition to the five thematic panels, the Presidential Elections Program always features a conversation with the conference co-chairs. The 2020 co-chairs were Stephanie Cutter and Beth Myers, each of whom played a key role in the 2012 presidential election. In 2012 Cutter served as President Barack Obama’s deputy campaign manager, while Myers served as a senior advisor to Mitt Romney’s presidential campaign. Dana Bash, CNN’s chief political correspondent who covered the 2012 presidential campaign, moderated the conversation between Cutter and Myers.

Bash began the conversation by asking Cutter and Myers to reflect on a statement made by Presidential Elections Program co-director John Williams in his opening remarks. Williams stated that the 2012 presidential campaign was the last “civilized” campaign, contrasting it with the chaos of the 2016 and 2020 presidential campaigns.

Myers agreed that while there were occasionally sparks, the 2012 campaign was at least civilized. Campaign staff still communicated with each other, and when Romney and Obama were on the debate stage together, there was absolute respect between them, with standard protocol always observed. In sum, from Myers' perspective, it was a "normal" campaign.

Cutter also agreed. She admitted that in 2012 the campaigns did follow the old adage of politics being a contact sport, with frequent attacks, but within areas that were widely viewed as being fair game, such as Romney's record in business and his performance as governor of Massachusetts.

Bash then asked a question that was on the minds of many: Will presidential campaigns in the United States return to pre-2016 standards, or has the comity ship sailed, leaving us in a brave new world of conflict?

Cutter's response was measured but cautiously optimistic. She viewed the Biden campaign as attempting to steer the 2020 campaign and the country back to the pre-2016 normalcy and standards that were lost when Donald Trump captured the 2016 GOP presidential nomination. However, she cautioned that while Joe Biden may have a desire to return to more traditional politics, Trump is not going anywhere soon, and if he is the GOP nominee in 2024, we should expect a presidential campaign with a level of civility more akin to that in 2020 than in 2012.

Myers concurred with Cutter and believed that much depends on what path national Republicans choose to follow during the 2020-2024 period. Will they break from Trump, or will they continue a combination of either implicitly or explicitly enabling Trump-style politics to become the standard within the Republican Party?

Moving from the topic of campaigning to that of governance, Bash asked Cutter if she believed that Biden was fully aware of the governance challenges that he would be facing. Cutter indicated she felt that Biden was conscious of the challenges, and she was optimistic that, given his long track record of working across the aisle in the U.S. Senate, he would be well-equipped and ready to move his legislative agenda forward. She recognized that dealing with Republicans such as GOP Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell would not be easy, but concluded by saying, "if there is anybody, any duo, that could find areas to work together, it would be Mitch McConnell and Joe Biden."

Bash then returned to the topic of the 2012 presidential campaign in which Cutter and Myers played prominent roles. At the time, it was not common for women to occupy such prominent positions in presidential campaigns, and Bash asked Cutter and Myers both what it was like to be a woman in that position in 2012, and what strides have been made over the course of the past eight years.

Cutter responded that women still face challenges in campaign organizations, despite the fact that more women have risen to leadership roles in campaigns over the past decade and are being respected and listened to. Cutter highlighted the prominent role of her former co-deputy campaign manager and business partner, Jen O'Malley Dillon, who managed Biden's 2020 presidential campaign and was named Biden's deputy chief of staff.

Myers quipped that she felt sorry for the guys in the Biden-Harris administration, "because there is definitely a female wave taking over." Myers also reflected on her experience as deputy campaign manager for Republican Bill Clements in his 1986 gubernatorial election bid against the Democratic incumbent, Governor Mark White.

Myers recalled a time when she was the only woman in the room, other than the candidate's wife. Even though she was not the lowest-ranking person on the campaign organizational chart, she was assigned to be the note-taker (even as she had to get ready to give a presentation of her own), and to top things off, at one point somebody said to her, "Honey, can you get me a coffee?" At that point, Rita Clements (the candidate's wife), "broke character and said 'Look, this is ridiculous,' and pointed to a guy sitting in a corner, 'You go and get the coffee!'" It was a seminal moment for Myers, and from that point on she enjoyed considerably more respect from many on the campaign. The lesson for her was that you can't just expect some of these traditional roles to change on their own; people need to be proactive in changing them and stand up when necessary.

Bash then directed a question to Myers (as a Republican woman) about the success that Republican women have had in building their numbers in Congress, with 28 incoming Republican female U.S. House members (which still pales in comparison to the 89 Democratic female U.S. House members). While Myers continues to worry about the negative effects of Trumpism on the election of Republican women, she was comforted by the support for them in down-ballot races. She concluded that while the Republican Party still had a great deal of work to do, Republican women are not an "endangered species" today—something that she feared prior to the November 2020 election.

Bash concluded with a question for Cutter related to the widely-praised 2020 Democratic National Convention that Cutter organized and what challenges she faced when assembling it in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Cutter explained that even though Biden faced criticism for his conservative approach in favoring a virtual convention, it was important for him to demonstrate how his campaign and the Democratic Party were handling the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, Cutter and her colleagues had to create a virtual convention playbook as the "plays were being made." In the end, it was a very successful experience that sparked a great deal of innovation. And, the "safe" approach adopted by Biden provided his campaign with what it considered to be a positive contrast to the Trump campaign, whose large public events were often followed by reports of COVID-19 outbreaks from local public health authorities.

Panel IV: A View from the Campaign Bus

Although interest in the 2020 presidential election caused experts to anticipate an increase in voter turnout over the previous election, no one foresaw the record-breaking number of voters who went to the polls. Nearly 160 million people voted in the 2020 election, far exceeding the previous record of 137 million in 2016. That represented the second largest election-to-election increase since 1948, the first election after World War II. As a further testament to voter interest, 62% percent of all voting-age Americans voted in 2016, the highest percentage since 1960 when 62.8% voted.

In this panel, three political reporters—Jonathan Allen, a senior political analyst for NBC News; Gromer Jeffers, a political writer for *The Dallas Morning News*; and Karen Tumulty, a columnist for *The Washington Post*—discussed the large voter turnout in 2020 and their experiences covering the election. Jamie Gangel, a special correspondent for CNN, moderated the panel.

“I expected that more people would vote for [Donald] Trump than did last time,” Allen said. “I expected that more people would vote for [Joe] Biden than for [Hillary] Clinton, but certainly not in terms of the level of increase. People wanted to vote.”

Panelists agreed that after a tumultuous four years of the Trump presidency—one that was largely either loved or loathed depending on which side of the political aisle a voter sat—Americans were eager to go to the polls once again. As a result, Trump got 11 million more votes than he received in 2016, and Biden got 15 million more votes than Clinton received in 2016.

“On the Republican side, you had Trump, this sort of lightning rod of extremism,” Allen said. “And on the Democratic side, you had Trump battling against what he said was socialism. And people didn't buy that about Biden.”

However, panelists said, there was another political phenomenon occurring. Both the Trump and Biden campaigns focused largely on what Allen called a “base-only strategy.” That is, they focused primarily on identifying their supporters and getting them to the polls.

“Candidates and parties have figured out the game of getting more and more people to the polls and sort of fighting it out on that level,” Allen explained. “So, I'm not surprised when we see numbers increase on each side.”

The results showed that, as polling had predicted, Biden won—with a 306-to-232 margin in the Electoral College and a margin of more than 7 million in the national vote. Although Trump mounted more than 50 legal challenges, none succeeded. Biden was sworn into office on January 20, 2021.

When Jamie Gangel questioned panelists about the effect that the COVID-19 pandemic had on the turnout of Trump supporters, Jeffers said he was not surprised that Trump did well.

“We’ve kind of been here before in 2016 with the Access Hollywood tape,” Jeffers said. “He looked like a dead man walking in that election as well, until that moment happened, and he performed quite well. So, I figured that he would get his base back out. I didn’t think the numbers would be as high as they were, but I figured maybe he would get a little extra.”

Trump’s biggest mistake, Jeffers stated, was in handling the pandemic in a way that alienated older voters who tend to be Republican. Before the pandemic, Trump was receiving credit for an economy that “worked and was humming.” Had he taken a more disciplined approach to battle the pandemic, he might have been able to keep many Americans on his side, Jeffers said.

“In times of crisis, Americans want to rally around their leader,” he elaborated. “And if they think you’re trying, if they think you’re making moves that are based on logic and science, they’ll give you the benefit of the doubt, even if there are some rocky patches.”

Allen agreed, saying that had Trump handled the pandemic better, some voters might have given him latitude despite any other issues they may have had with him. Over time, Tumulty added, Trump’s politization of public health matters—such as mask-wearing, the use of hydroxychloroquine, etc.—became signifiers of whether a person was a Democrat or Republican—and not of solid science.

Along the way, the panelists said, many Americans lost confidence in Trump during a time of crisis, as it appeared that the president had “never figured out how to deal with it.”

“As we all know, no matter how many times we go through a crisis, the best politics is to simply deal as straightforwardly and as effectively with the crisis in front of you as you possibly can,” Allen said. “And he did not appear to be doing that.”

Biden, in the meantime, was spending much of his time working in his basement when so much of the focus was on the pandemic and Trump’s response to it. The strategy attracted much criticism from the media and many Democrats, but it worked, the panelists said.

“Having him in the basement and keeping him on message [was] not necessarily a problem,” Tumulty stated.

For Biden, the panelists agreed, the key moment came early in the Democratic primary. After struggling in the New Hampshire primary and the Iowa and Nevada caucuses, Biden caught wind in his sails in South Carolina when he won the endorsement of U.S. Representative Jim Clyburn, an influential African American from that state. Tumulty called it an “extraordinary moment.”

“It was a single endorsement ... that essentially pulled Joe Biden’s campaign out of a ditch and put him on the road to the nomination,” Tumulty added. “At that point, the campaign was out of money. It was really not at all equipped for a general election campaign, which is a completely different endeavor than a primary campaign.”

After that, Biden breezed through to win the Democratic nomination with strong support from African Americans. He also maintained distance from the more progressive wing of his party without alienating it. And finally, he won the general election with strong support from the breadth of his party.

“I hope there are going to be good books written about this,” Tumulty said.

The panelists gave a lot of credit for Biden’s victory to his campaign manager, Jen O’Malley Dillon, who pulled the Democrat’s campaign out of the ditch and put it back on course.

“[She] just didn't mess it up,” Jeffers said of O’Malley Dillon’s strategy. “I think she knew that [Biden] had Trump on the other side—if you can just have a coherent message and let it play out, then he would have success. And that's what happened.”

With Dillon at the helm, Allen said, Biden focused on something that Clinton had not been able to do in 2016—connecting his biography to his political message. Allen noted that Biden successfully emanated the “three C's”—character, competence, and compassion.

In the meantime, Trump was his own worst enemy.

“Another big moment was that first debate where Donald Trump comes out onto the stage,” Tumulty said. “I mean, the only thing that could have made that debate any wilder was if somebody had released a rabid squirrel on the stage. And I think that was also a real turning point in this election.”

Despite Biden’s win, said Tumulty, the great mystery of the 2020 election is why the polls and the expectations were so correct about the presidential race but so wrong about everything else, particularly the prediction that Republicans would fare poorly in congressional races. Instead, Republicans picked up 13 seats in the House of Representatives, and although they lost some seats in the Senate, they still held a total of 50 seats, giving the Democrats a very narrow majority.

“All the polls, all the expectations, would have suggested that the Democrats were going to pick up seats in the House, that the Republicans had a better than 50/50 chance of losing the Senate,” Tumulty explained. “I have covered a lot of presidential elections—I think 1988 was my first—and this is the first one where you have seen a new president come in with absolutely no coattails.”

“And I think that that is what is going to be studied about this election in years to come,” she said. “The outcome of the presidential election is not a mystery, but there was a lot going on in the electorate that I think we really didn't understand.”

Near the conclusion of the panel discussion, Gangel asked about how journalism has changed during the four years of the Trump presidency. “I think as reporters we’re used to normal dysfunction; reporters generally ... don't like to use the L-word,” Gangel elaborated.

“We fact check. We don't like to say he lied. But it's changed a lot in the last four years, and ... I feel as if we, even now, are dealing with two realities in this country—people who believe the election was stolen and people who don't.”

Tumulty responded by noting that with so many distractions during the Trump presidency, it was hard to focus on what really mattered. “Where we have really fallen down in the Trump years is that we have not distinguished [what’s important] well enough for our readers and viewers,” she explained. “He creates 15 distractions a day and we swing at every ball he's throwing over the plate. We don't sort of say, you know, you can ignore that one.”

The result, she added, is that Americans have gotten exhausted to the point that they tune out the media.

Jeffers agreed stating, “One of the criticisms I get from discerning voters, discerning readers, discerning television viewers is—when can I have my normal news back? When can it not be all about Trump, every day, every hour, all day?”

Panel V: Governance and Politics in the Aftermath of the 2020 Presidential Election

The aftermath of the contentious 2020 presidential election left many voters worried about ballot security and many political experts concerned about the balance of democracy—which can teeter when a large percentage of Americans believes that fraud influenced the outcome. The final panel of the conference covered these issues and featured three political experts: Dave Carney, a Republican political strategist, Amy Walter, the national editor for *The Cook Political Report*, and Celinda Lake, a Democratic political strategist. Michael Nelson, a political science professor at Rhodes College who has written extensively about the presidency and presidential campaigns, moderated the discussion.

Carney and Walter pointed out that unusual delays in the counting of presidential ballots in several states—including California, New York, and Illinois—stirred doubts about the legitimacy of the election. So too did problems in states like Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, where vote-by-mail was utilized for the first time.

Carney elaborated by stating that any perceived problems with the election “undercut the credibility of the government ... and therefore, the credibility of the things the government does and says gets undermined.”

Walter echoed Carney’s concern, saying that it’s problematic when so many people believe that fraud influenced the election results. “What I worry about, and I think we all should be worried about,” Walter said, “is if we fundamentally have a country in which half the folks believe that the election was rigged and stolen, and the other half believes that it wasn't, I don't know where we go from here.”

All three panelists agreed that one place where the country can move forward is with election reform to build confidence in the system. “One of the strongest things we find in our data is the bipartisan consensus around reform,” Lake said.

However, the panelists disagreed about where reforms are needed and who should make them. Carney indicated that states should take the lead to make changes that increase voting access as well as ballot security. Lake pushed for Congress to take a federal approach by approving H.R. 1 in 2021. (H.R. 1 was later passed by the Democrat-controlled House but could not get out of the evenly split Senate).

Moderator Michael Nelson noted that former President Jimmy Carter and former Secretary of State James A. Baker, III were able to bridge the partisan divide when a commission they co-chaired produced a bipartisan report that recommended reforms in 2005. “Figuring out how to process those votes in a way that people respect is fair might be something that can happen again,” he said.

Regardless, discussion of ballot problems in 2020 will likely continue for several years. “I think when everybody runs for president in ‘24, they’re all going to talk about this—‘We can’t let this happen again,’” Carney said. He also pointed out that Biden’s credibility could be undermined if critics suggest that he was elected under “questionable circumstances.”

Walter added that Biden won an election that both campaigns recognized as an existential moment in U.S. history. “If you fundamentally believe that Donald Trump was dangerous to the country, dangerous for democracy, whether or not you agreed with any of his policies didn’t matter—you were voting against him,” Walter said. “If you believed that having Democrats in charge meant that they are going to fundamentally alter the fabric of American society—whether that means they’re truly going to bring socialism to America or they’re going to engage in this sort of PC cancel culture [of] erasing history—then you voted for Donald Trump.”

When asked about the lessons Democrats should take from the 2020 election, Lake listed three critical points. First, linking other Republican candidates to Trump, as was attempted with Senator Susan Collins (R-Maine), was not a successful strategy for Democrats, because voters were able to recognize the differences. Second, Lake suggested that Democrats should match Trump’s turnout operation in the future. And third, she argued that Democrats need to focus their message more on improving the economy in order to broaden their appeal.

“People are not going to elect Democrats unless they’re good on the economy, particularly when it’s the number one issue,” Lake said. “So I think one of the lessons going forward is that we as a party—led by Joe Biden and Vice President Harris—need to establish a strong, robust, muscular economic policy and identity. And Democrats aren’t going to get elected until, across the board, we have one.”

When asked about the key takeaways for Republicans during the 2020 election, Carney said the party needs to continue focusing on state issues more than federal ones. Republicans had great success across the board on winning local and state races, he said.

“I don't think that countrywide voters really care much about what goes on in Washington. Nothing happens in Washington,” Carney continued. “It's impossible to get anything done there other than name some post office. The state is where the action is.”

He went on to explain that people care most about things like their quality of life, the economy, education—things that are important to their daily lives—and for that, they look to the state.

Moving on to discuss some of the key cultural moments of 2020 and their impact on the election, Carney and Lake focused on the death of George Floyd at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer. They said the months of protests afterward played a significant role in election outcomes across the country.

Carney also said that the riots in Kenosha, Wisconsin following the police shooting of Jacob Blake set the tone for Republican victories at the local levels. “Most people in ‘flyover country’ expected riots in places like Portland and Seattle,” Carney said, because those cities “have a reputation of being far out there. But when it's a city in Middle America of 100,000 people ... where all these businesses were destroyed ... I think that scared people.”

However, in the aftermath of the riots, the “defund the police” movement was instrumental in ensuring that Republicans won at the local and state levels, Carney continued.

Lake countered that Democrats were slow to respond to the way Trump and Republicans defined the phrase “defund the police.” “Two-thirds of Americans oppose ‘defund the police,’ but half of Americans believe that defund the police doesn't really mean *defund* the police—it means reprioritize,” she said. “And Americans are very interested in police reform, but we let the label stick of ‘defund the police.’ We didn't define it.”

Nelson also asked the panel about the vice presidency of Kamala Harris, the first woman of color to hold the position, and what they thought of the widespread speculation surrounding her potential run for president in the next election cycle, given Biden's age and the possibility that he may not want a second term.

Lake said because Harris and Biden have a strong relationship—one that started when she was friends with the president's late son, Beau Biden—and because the president believes that the vice president should play a significant role in governance, Harris may have the “best job in America.” As a former prosecutor, Harris could also help the administration define the “defund the police” debate, Lake added. And as a Black woman, she noted, Harris could help encourage more African Americans to get vaccinated against COVID-19.

Regardless of whether Harris runs for president in 2024 or 2028, she will be a big force in American politics, Lake concluded. “The sky's the limit.”

Carney agreed that Harris could have a bright political future, particularly if she works well with the office of the presidency, something that doesn't always happen with vice presidents. If Harris becomes too anxious about establishing herself as a potential candidate in 2024, Carney said, that could pose problems for her relationship with the president.

However, Carney added, it won't be a layup for Harris to win the 2024 Democratic primary even if Biden indicates that he won't run in 2024, because other Democrats will also be interested in running for the White House.

“I think that the opportunity for Harris is great,” Carney said. “But obviously, the one thing about being the vice president is if things don't go well in the first couple of years, and the economy doesn't come back—or if there are other issues—she will be tagged with that when she runs.”

Walter agreed that other Democrats are likely to enter the 2024 presidential race, should Biden decide not to seek re-election. However, she noted, it's unlikely any of them would pull out early from the 2024 Democratic primary—as Pete Buttigieg, Amy Klobuchar, and Beto O'Rourke did in 2020 to solidify support for Biden at a time when the party's number one priority was defeating Trump.

“So now you have a whole bunch of folks who [gave] up their shot—or what they saw as their shot in 2020—but who are still young enough to want to come back in 2024,” Walter said. “They were on the same stage with Kamala Harris. They lasted longer than Kamala Harris.”

Walter also discussed an overriding problem with elections today and something that legislative reforms can't fix: the media's role in dividing the public and fueling anger.

“The bigger challenge is when you have algorithms and business models that are really driven to keeping us angry, and to keeping us divided, and to keeping us enraged, all the time,” Walter said. “Cable news is just an outrage machine. That's its entire job. I don't care which channel you're watching. Its whole job is to make you say, ‘Can you believe this?’”

“How do you do anything in this moment?” she said. “How do you govern at [this] time?”

Conference Participants

Honorary Chairs

Stephanie Cutter is a founder and partner at Precision Strategies, a strategic consulting firm she launched with three other veterans from the Obama 2012 campaign team. With a long history in politics, she served as the deputy campaign manager for President Obama's re-election campaign, a job that earned her the title of "Mr. Obama's one-woman attack squad," according to the *The New York Times*. A graduate from Smith College and Georgetown University Law Center, she currently sits on the boards of Organizing for America, the Edward M. Kennedy Institute for the U.S. Senate, and the University of Chicago Institute of Politics.

Beth Myers is a political consultant, campaign advisor and one of the Republican Party's leading strategists and most trusted authorities on the political dynamics of Capitol Hill and the state capitols. As the closest political advisor to Mitt Romney, she served as chief of staff during his governorship in Massachusetts, campaign manager during his bid for the Republican nomination for the 2008 presidential race, and senior campaign advisor for the Romney/Ryan 2012 campaign. A graduate of Tufts University and Southern Methodist University School of Law, she is a co-founder of the Shawmut Group, a public affairs consulting firm based in Boston, Massachusetts.

Participants

Jonathan Allen is an award-winning journalist and *The New York Times* bestselling author who covers national politics for NBC News. He is a winner of the Everett McKinley Dirksen Award for reporting on Congress and the Sandy Hume Memorial Award for Excellence in Political Journalism. The book he wrote with Amy Parnes, *Shattered: Inside Hillary Clinton's Doomed Campaign*, won national acclaim, and the two are now collaborating on a book that examines the 2020 presidential election.

Lonna Atkeson, Ph.D., is a professor and Regent's Lecturer in the Department of Political Science at the University of New Mexico, where she also serves as the director of the Center for the Study of Voting, Elections, and Democracy and the director of the Institute of Social Research. She is an internationally recognized expert in the areas of elections sciences, survey methodology, election administration, public opinion, and political behavior, and the author of over 50 articles, book chapters, technical reports, and other works on these and related topics.

Dana Bash is CNN's chief political correspondent based in Washington, D.C., where she covers both campaigns and Congress. She regularly serves as a moderator for CNN's political town hall specials and moderated CNN's first Democratic Party primary debate of the 2020 election cycle in Detroit, as well as the last Democratic presidential debate of the cycle held in Washington, D.C. A graduate of George Washington University, Bash was the winner of the National Press Foundation's 2019 Sol Taishoff Award for Excellence in Broadcast Journalism.

Mitchell W. Berger, J.D., founded the Florida-based law firm Berger Singerman in 1985 and serves as co-chair of the firm. He has nearly 40 years of successful representation in commercial disputes, including for Fortune 500 companies. Twenty years ago, Mitchell represented former Vice President Al Gore and his running mate Joseph Lieberman in the post-2000 election Florida lawsuit, *Bush v. Gore*.

Dave Carney is president and CEO of Norway Hill Associates, Inc., a New Hampshire-based public relations and communications firm. Prior to founding Norway Hill in 1996, Carney was special assistant to President George H. W. Bush, and he served in 1992 as national field director and director of political affairs for the Bush/Quayle 1992 re-election campaign. He was called a "legend among Republican operatives" by *Time Magazine* reporter Michael Kramer.

Jamie Gangel is an award-winning correspondent who joined CNN in August 2015. A veteran reporter, Gangel has profiled presidents George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, and Barack Obama, as well as dozens of prominent newsmakers. A graduate of the University of Georgetown School of Foreign Service, her many honors and awards include an Emmy, the Edward R. Murrow award, a Clarion award, and AP and Gracie awards.

Ben Ginsberg, J.D., has represented numerous political parties, political campaigns, candidates, members of Congress and state legislatures, governors, corporations, trade associations, vendors, donors, and individuals participating in the political process. He served as national counsel to the Bush-Cheney presidential campaigns in the 2004 and 2000 election cycles and played a central role in the 2000 Florida recount.

Kenneth Goldstein, Ph.D., is a professor of politics at the University of San Francisco and faculty director of the USF in D.C. program. Prior to joining the faculty at USF, he was a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He is the author or co-author of four books and of scores of refereed journal articles and book chapters on topics that include political advertising, presidential elections, and survey methodology. Goldstein also served as president of Kantar Media CMAG—a non-partisan, Washington D.C.-based political consulting firm. He has consulted for the ABC News election unit as a member of their election night decision team and has worked on network election night coverage in every U.S. federal election since 1988.

Gromer Jeffers is a political reporter for *The Dallas Morning News*, where he has covered national, state, and local elections, including the presidential campaigns of George W. Bush and Barack Obama. He previously served as a government reporter for the *Kansas City Star* and a reporter for the *Chicago Defender*. Jeffers has reported on Texas Governor Rick Perry's campaigns for governor, John Cornyn's first campaign for the Senate, and four Dallas mayoral races.

Celinda Lake is a leading political strategist and serves as tactician and senior advisor known for cutting-edge research on issues including the economy, health care, the environment, and education. She and her firm, Lake Research Partners, have worked for several institutions including the Democratic National Committee, the Democratic Governors Association, AFL-CIO, SEIU, CWA, IAFF, Sierra Club, NARAL, Human Rights Campaign, and Planned Parenthood. Her international work has included work in Liberia, Kyrgyzstan, Belarus, Ukraine, South Africa, and Central America.

Zac Moffatt is the CEO of Targeted Victory, a full-service strategy and marketing agency providing optimized outcomes in the digital age. Moffatt served as the digital director for Mitt Romney's 2012 campaign for president and is a leading voice in how digital media is disrupting traditional communications. In 2020, Targeted Victory's numerous clients included Republican Senators Susan Collins, Joni Ernst, and Mitch McConnell; Republican Representatives Cathy McMorris Rodgers, Steve Scalise, and Ann Wagner; and Republican Senator-Elect and Representative-Elect Cindy Hyde-Smith and Tony Gonzales.

Michael Nelson, Ph.D., is the Fulmer Professor of Political Science at Rhodes College, a senior fellow at the University of Virginia's Miller Center, and senior contributing editor and book editor of *The Cook Political Report*. According to a Hauenstein Center survey of college courses on the American presidency, two of Nelson's books on the presidency rank among the top five most frequently studied: *The Presidency and the Political System* and *The American Presidency: Origins and Development, 1776-2015*, written with Sidney M. Milkis.

Richard H. Pildes, J.D., is the Sudler Family Professor of Constitutional Law at the New York University School of Law and a leading expert on constitutional law, the Supreme Court, the system of government in the United States, and legal issues concerning the structure of democracy. A former law clerk to Justice Thurgood Marshall, he has been elected into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Law Institute, and has also received recognition as a Guggenheim Fellow and a Carnegie Scholar.

Chuck Rocha is the president and founder of Solidarity Strategies, an award-winning, Latino-owned political consulting firm that seeks to empower progressive clients who inspire entire communities to participate in and strengthen our democracy. Rocha served as a senior advisor to the Bernie Sanders 2020 presidential campaign and developed the campaign's strategy to communicate and interact with Latinos across the country. Rocha began his career as a union worker in Tyler, Texas and went on to become the national political director of the United Steel Workers of America.

Mindy Romero, Ph.D., is the founder and director of the Center for Inclusive Democracy at the University of Southern California's Sol Price School of Public Policy. Her research focuses on political behavior and race/ethnicity and seeks to explain patterns of voting and political underrepresentation among youth and communities of color. Her research is often cited in the national media, and she is a frequent guest on National Public Radio. She is also regularly consulted by a wide array of policymakers, elected officials, and community advocates.

Daron Shaw, Ph.D., is a professor of government at the University of Texas at Austin. He is the author or co-author of three books and dozens of journal articles on topics that include voter turnout, presidential elections, political parties, and political behavior. He is the co-director of the Fox News Poll and of the University of Texas/*Texas Tribune* Poll as well as the director of the Texas Lyceum Poll. He is also an associate principal investigator of the 2020 American National Election Study and a member of the national decision desk team for Fox News.

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. A native of San Antonio, where she began her career at the now-defunct *San Antonio Light*, Tumulty holds a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Texas at Austin and an MBA from Harvard Business School.

The Honorable Jason Villalba is president of the Texas Hispanic Policy Foundation and chairman of the foundation's board of directors. He is also a financial lawyer in Foley & Lardner LLP's corporate practice group in Dallas. Between 2013 and 2019, he served as a member of the Texas House of Representatives for Dallas County's Texas House District 114 where, among other committee assignments, he served on the Select Committee on Redistricting. He is also a chairman emeritus of the Dallas chapter of the Republican National Hispanic Assembly and the past vice chair of the Dallas County Republican Party.

Amy Walter is the national editor of *The Cook Political Report*, where she provides analysis of the issues, trends, and events that shape the political environment. With over 25 years of experience, Walter has built a reputation as an accurate, objective, and insightful political analyst with unparalleled access to campaign insiders and decision-makers.

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 PenneyMissouri 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.