PUBLIC SCHOLARSHIP

Webinar Highlights from "Engaging the 2024 US Election: An Experts Roundtable"

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On June 18, 2024, the American Political Science Association (APSA) organized the second webinar in its *Engaging the 2024 US Election Webinar Series*, titled "Engaging the 2024 US Election: An Experts Roundtable," to showcase how political scientists are analyzing and interpreting the 2024 US election. Moderated by Michelle Allendoerfer, the Senior Director of Teaching and Learning at APSA, the webinar included Andra Gillespie (Emory University), Julia Azari (Marquette University), and Michael Tesler (University of California, Irvine). The experts discussed various issues, including the main factors of this election cycle, legal convictions, polls, mobilization, election procedures and legitimacy, congressional races, and important state races to describe the 2024 US campaign and election as a continuation and intensification of political conflict that emerged following then freshman Senator Barack Obama's 2008 presidential election victory.

THE ELECTION CYCLE'S PRIMARY FACTORS

The discussion started with introductory remarks on the main factors of this election cycle. Julia Azari highlighted two significant frameworks: the Biden campaign's prospective framing, focusing on the potential impacts of a second Trump term, and the Trump campaign's retrospective framing, which critiques the Biden presidency and addresses political, social, and economic dissatisfaction. Azari emphasized differences in campaign strategies, noting that opposing Trump got Biden elected in 2020, and that these strategic decisions and voter attention are crucial in this cycle. Azari reiterated that a prospective strategy of Biden's campaign is framing the second Trump presidency as a threat to liberal democratic norms, whereas a retrospective strategy of Trump's campaign would focus on the Biden presidency's poor handling of economic inflation and immigration.

Andra Gillespie discussed voter turnout and misinformation. Building on Azari's discussion of retrospective voting, Gillespie pointed out that some voters might not remember the same things as others. She also noted that voter turnout is crucial in this election, especially in a polarized environment. Also, Gillespie shared concerns about the impact of misinformation on voter behavior. Michael Tesler focused on the saliency of issues and Biden's approval ratings as key factors and stressed the importance of framing campaigns as referendums on their opponents for candidates (drawing parallels to the 2016 election between Clinton and Trump). Yet, Tesler noted that Biden's approval ratings are highly variable especially among Democrats, thereby Biden must improve these ratings for potential success, particularly through the support of young voters and minorities.



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LEGAL CONVICTIONS, POLLS, VOTER MOBILIZATION, PROCEDURES, AND ELECTION LEGITIMACY

Moving forward with the possible effects of the legal convictions of Trump and Hunter Biden on the election, Gillespie argued that the convictions of Trump for falsifying business records and Hunter Biden on gun charges are unlikely to influence the election significantly, as public opinions on these issues are already established. Tesler agreed, suggesting that these cases might be seen as politically motivated, having little impact. Yet, Tesler stated these cases could remind voters of Trump's unfitness, which helped Biden in 2020. Azari added there may be a minimal influence of the convictions on undecided voters.

The webinar continued with a focus on poll trends and their meanings. Tesler mentioned that current polls are more stable than in 2016 and 2020, which is concerning for Biden as he is now consistently behind Trump. Gillespie recommended caution against one popular claim that Black voters are currently re-aligning towards Trump and the GOP. Gillespie pointed out that these claims are relying on polls with very small subsample sizes of Black voters. Azari added that younger voters are also significant as they could affect election outcomes crucially, especially in battleground states like Wisconsin and Michigan.

The discussion then moved to issues that may mobilize voters. Azari highlighted abortion and climate issues relating them to democracy. Gillespie emphasized the role of media, stating the importance of the outlets voters follow. For example, conservative media might highlight the border crisis. Gillespie also added that local state interests are significant, such as the Israel-Gaza conflict effect on Michigan voters She also notes that she will be interested to see how the Supreme Court's decision on presidential immunity is used in the election. Tesler stressed the significance of identity-based issues like abortion and immigration. Regarding mobilization, Tesler noted the potential demobilizing influence of the Israel-Gaza conflict, pointing out Biden's low approval rates on this issue.

The webinar also addressed voting procedures like ballot

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access, early voting mail and election legitimacy. Gillespie stated that the perceptions of the 2020 US election's legitimacy will affect views on the 2024 election. Tesler shared some concerns about the losing candidate's response and its potential impact on election legitimacy. Azari emphasized the importance of elite partisan cues in impacting public perceptions of election outcomes.

CONGRESSIONAL RACES, STRATEGIC DECISIONS, AND CRUCIAL SENATE AND HOUSE RACES

The webinar moved to congressional elections and strategies for aligning or distancing from Trump or Biden. Tesler expected strategic distancing from Democrat candidates in districts where Biden is losing, particularly Jon Tester in Montana and Sherrod Brown in Ohio. Conversely, Tesler anticipated Republicans to fully support Trump to avoid any political consequences like a decrease in voter backing. Azari mentioned that whereas the Democratic Party is more ideologically consolidated, there will still be tensions about alignment with the presidential candidate based on Biden's declining popularity. For instance, Tammy Baldwin from Wisconsin balanced support for several Biden policies while distancing from others. Azari added that this strategy might work for some Republicans, especially in competitive states, where they can distance themselves from Trump on certain issues, like election denial. Gillespie emphasized the significance of personal votes for candidates with a strong track record, suggesting they should use this to outperform their party's national performance. Gillespie added that Republicans sometimes underestimate the importance of votes for specific candidates in states, like governors or representatives, i.e., personal vote, giving Democrats an advantage. As an example, Gillespie highlighted Larry Hogan's experience in Maryland, where his distancing from Trump caused threats despite his consistent local strategy to win during the previous elections by appealing to centrist suburban Democrats.

Moving forward with important Senate and House races, Gillespie emphasized the importance of battleground states, such as Georgia, Wisconsin, Michigan, Nevada, Arizona, Pennsylvania, and some second-tier states like Minnesota, Virginia, and North Carolina. Regarding Congressional and Senate races, Gillespie mentioned Maryland, Michigan, and Wisconsin, along with states with candidates of color on the ballots, such as Arizona, Texas, Delaware, and Maryland. Tesler highlighted the significance of Rust Belt states for both the Senate and electoral college, Nevada and Arizona for the electoral college, and specific districts like Nebraska's 2nd congressional district, and places with significant Black and Latino voters. Additionally, Azari emphasized the importance of states with urban-rural dynamics, such as Georgia, Arizona, North Carolina, Virginia, and Wisconsin.

CLOSING REMARKS

Following the question section of the webinar on voters' rational responses, persuasion, and senior voters, the webinar ended with closing remarks. Tesler anticipated a close and challenging election, recommending participants to prepare. Gillespie reiterated the importance of voter turnout, specifically in battleground states. Azari also expected a close election and discussed vice-presidential selection, suggesting Trump might pick someone without their own political base for dependency. Tesler agreed, emphasizing the potential of Doug Burgum. Gillespie responded to Byron Donalds as a possibility but doubted any Black candidates could increase African American vote share. Overall, the webinar provided comprehensive insights into the 2024 US Election, voter behavior, campaign strategies, and the impact of legal convictions and polling trends. ■

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