

Covering 2020: What Lessons Should the Press and the Pollsters Take from 2016?

John Dickerson: Thanks all over you for being here. Last year I was in this bar and the panel was the global world order. So it's a place where people come with confusing topics where they feel they need a drink. Um, so we're going to talk about the 2016 campaign. What went wrong, what can be improved upon in 2020? I just want to put us in historical context. Um, uh, my understanding is that there are some people who are unhappy with the 2016 campaign and the way it ran. Um, so I'd like to offer you just a little bit of historical perspective. Here's one quote in regard to the method pursued by political parties with reference to electing their respective candidates. There seems to be just one opinion that it is disgraceful to the country that's the New York Mirror in 1852 the organized bigotry, the like of which I have never seen.

John Dickerson: I feel as if some poison gas had spread over us and that our democracy will suffer from this for many years to come. That is about the eight, the 1928 election. And this last one, anyone who feels good about American politics after the 1988 presidential campaign probably also enjoys train wrecks or maybe a day at the beach watching an oil slick wash ashore. So Susan Page, we are in the tradition of American politics that, um, people are unhappy with the way the campaigns are run, take place, the way voters behave, journalists, pollsters. So let's do a little diagnosis first. What was the problem in 2016? Was there one?

Susan Page: So in 60 seconds or less than the door in the debate tradition for Wednesday and Thursday night, right? I have 60 seconds to diagnose what was wrong and in 2016, uh, yeah, so actually I've covered, you know, it's historically it's true. We've hit bad PR. You know, we've had ups and downs with the elections in the past. People are almost always unhappy with, with our politics. But this was the 10th presidential election I've covered and it was by far the most disruptive, the most, um, the one that caused the most anx for everyone. The one that was most confused. Um, and I think I may have stolen this line from you, but the thing we learned most about 2016 was the lesson we learned most was humility. Uh, because, uh, you know, I feel like we didn't do a good enough job in explaining and understanding and explaining what was going on. Uh, I think it's a time in our country when there's, um, a lot of dissatisfaction and president Trump didn't invent that dissatisfaction, but he really opened the door to take advantage of it in a way that was a remarkable to see. And it took us awhile to understand,

John Dickerson: Margie, you're upholster are you, and you've dealt with democratic campaigns, right? And The d triple c, the DNC show the pollsters get some, uh, grief. And the journalists who are addicted to Poles get some grief in 2016 there's, so what do you think happened with the polls in 2016? And the options are actually, the polls were right about the popular vote, or the polls were totally wrong or somewhere in the middle.

Margie Omero: So it's amazing that I still get this question. This is a question that people are desperate to find an answer to. And it's not just because it's not just because people, you know, someone said, hey, I still remember a public poll out of Michigan that was off a couple points. It's because the whole world was led to believe that an outcome that people thought was inconceivable was not, was actually not gonna happen. And then it happened. And so I think the enormity of what happened, I think is why people still find this topic interesting. And so there's been a lot of introspection in the industry since 2016 the public polls, I think we're off in part because of education. There's been a lot of analysis, uh, from the industry. And when you wait some of the public polling by education a little bit differently, it actually reduced a lot of the error.

Margie Omero: And then that error was magnified by the forecasters and then at air was magnified by people who wrote transition stories and other kinds of decisions. So, uh, so there was a little bit of error in waiting. And I don't mean error that somebody made a mistake because they did something wrong. But because education and the educational composition of the electorate is unknowable and it was a big driver in voters views toward Trump, it still is. So you see a lot of people trying to adjust. We have adjusted how we ask educational attainment, we do more qualitative, we do more focus groups. I think, you know, I think we've adjusted as an industry.

John Dickerson: So just very quickly for those who might not know, explain this, this like explain thermodynamics in 10 seconds, but explain what you mean by waiting because pollsters make essentially a guess about the composition of the electorate and that is different than interviewing everybody in the whole country and tallying up what they did.

Margie Omero: Right. So it, you know, there was somebody who was head of one of the industry polling industry association. Say we have this tool that is used to measure pounds, but we want it to measure ounces. Like we want this precision on the polling. And that brings us back to the debate polling, which I'm sure we'll get to where we want to have a precision that actually doesn't exist yet in the electorate this far out. Maybe. Maybe it's something we can feel that we're getting closer to as we're a couple of weeks out. But at this stage it's definitely not something that exists. And so what you have, you know there's error either or sometimes you have a poll will come in maybe a little bit more democratic than you think or a little bit more republican or a little bit more male or female things where you know some, you have some census data to give you a sense of what the electorate looks like and so you adjust it so you, you multiply one person by one something to kind of wake them up a little bit or by point is, you know, zero point something to weight them down a little bit.

Margie Omero: And this is something that every single polling outlet does in some way, shape or fashion and it can make a real difference. In fact, it made a difference in who qualified for the debates where you had a, the difference in weighting of one respondent actually made a difference in who you know was not potentially on

who was on the debate stage. Robert Costa, we know why campaigns need does need

Robert Costa: poles. Why do we need to talk about polls and should we stop? Polling matters to a point. It helps inform the reporting, but the reporting has to remain at the core that the reporters have to get out in the country and talk to voters. And that has never become more apparent than over the last few years where if you sit in a newsroom and you rely on polling data, then you are getting just a sliver of the picture. And I really trace this back 11 years ago to when I entered the journalism field. It was in the hot summer of 2008 the fall of 2008 I came into this business during that economic recession, the end of the 2008 campaign. And my first assignment was to cover Sarah Palin's vice presidential campaign. It was actually the best thing that ever happened because it forced me initially as a reporter to get right up to voters to talk about.

Robert Costa: At that point, there are loss of faith in institutions, in parties, in the economy, and even their own family, their community, and I had just read books like *Bowling Alone*, like by Robert Putnam in college, and so I was just going around and Oh eight oh nine I covered Sarah Pelton's book tour. It seemed like the worst assignment you could get as a young reporter, but I just kept confronting voters who were losing faith in the country on both sides. And this is why talking to voters matters. In 2014 the two key decisions we made at the post is I had breakfast with Donald Trump and I had breakfast with Bernie Sanders and Bernie Sanders gave one of his first interviews to the post talking about his campaign. We recognize, we tried to recognize that if you went beyond the polls, there was an opportunity to capture the rising populism and nationalism and racism that was out there on the right and on the left.

Robert Costa: When you talked to Senator Sanders, when he would talk about the corporate media and progressive values. And so, yeah, my, what I write on the top of every notebook is assume nothing because if you just go by polls and you go by the norms of American politics that you're going to miss the story because everywhere you go as a reporter, you encounter the fracturing of this country and you have to accept it, not judge it, not as to it's gonna follow by any norm and just report it out and still use polls to try to guide you. But they're not the story that had the same experience with the Buchanan campaign in 1992 it was same deal. You,

John Dickerson: you, and, and a lot of the same voters were supporters of Sarah Panel on later. Um, yeah. I mean, one thing we hear from viewers, readers is always, uh, but what about the issues? Why are you talking about polling the Horse Race? The, the, I'm sure something might be happening about in the country and that's, but what about the important issues? Um, are they undercovered and, and, and what does that mean cover the issues?

Yamiche A: I think as someone who covered both Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump, there can be issues and that could be policies. So president Trump, I think arguably,

even if you ask him, he was about, he was running a campaign that wasn't focused on this is the policy that I'm going to give you, but more this is the emotion that you're feeling and I'm going to make sure that you feel good about America, that you're, that I hear the fact that you are still frustrated that even if you'll, you have a job, it's not a good job. And that the trade deals have taken all these jobs out of your country. Um, and there's also this idea that these others, these immigrants, there's somehow, um, the, the, the reason why your life is as hard as it is on the Bernie Sanders sides, you would have someone also say, I understand that the system's rigged.

Yamiche A: I understand that your life is harder. And those people to blame are not the immigrants. They're the billionaires. So I think you had two men who were in some ways understanding that people are frustrated with their lives. Um, and I would add to that as a reporter who wasn't, who didn't cover president Obama's campaign but who read a lot of stories as a, as a college student, and we had all these stories about hope and change and how amazing it was that we elected an African American president. I don't think we had that many stories about people who were furious at the fact that this person was who was representing the country. So I think if you add both the issues and the frustrations economically, and then you add the idea that people are literally seeing their, their towns change. I've interviewed so many people who say, well, my grandkids are going to school with these immigrants.

Yamiche A: I the people who are driving me to the whole, to the hospital now is this man. He has a weird accent. I don't really feel comfortable with him. I think those are the issues that I think we need to cover more. There's a great series going on right now in the New York Times where a reporter named dead Wesley, he's covering white identity politics. And I think we don't talk about that enough in this country. The idea that when I would go out to talk to Trump supporters, I can think of one story I was asking you about healthcare policies. I was like, why are you excited about the president's healthcare policies? And for like 10 15 minutes, I'm asking, I'm asking. And he kept saying, well, people think I'm a racist. And I was like, well, why do people think you're racist? Finally? And I had her, first of all, forget that I was an African American woman asking him about healthcare because in his mind he was like, this black woman wants to know about race.

Yamiche A: So when I asked him that, he said, well, I just think that there are too many black people in my town. And his, his town was about 97% and white. But what he was telling me was that he was starting to see a little bit of the people from Milwaukee start to move north. And essentially that was what was, what was driving him. So even though as a reporter, you want to talk about healthcare policy, are there things, I think it's, it's critical to people that you're interviewing, give you the story. Because a lot of times you go out with an assignment and I think Robin, off Robert and all of us, you go out with an assignment, but sometimes the assignment, I think if you listen closely enough, people will tell you what they're really thinking. And I think that's probably something that

we're not doing enough of is we go out to talk about Medicare for all or whatever. And maybe the issue is really healthcare prices and the fact that someone went to the hospital and \$25,000 later, they can't pay their bill. So I think as reporters this time around, I'm hoping that when we go out to do whatever story we're doing about reparations or whatever, that we sit back and let people tell us what they're actually feeling and not just stick to the issues that we think are important,

Speaker 6: right?

Yamiche A: Or an you help train people to engage in civic dialogue. What, how do you do that? What do you prepare them for? Is it a hellscape out there or do you say no, there are people who are, who can be appealed to by reason and,

Lauren Leader: and I just want to add something which is a little outside of your question because I, I'm the only, not while I'm one of two non journalists on the panel, but I've been doing a lot of, of writing lately about the need for a deeper, more meaningful focus on, uh, the six women that are running for president, but also just more balanced coverage generally. Because back to your original question, I don't think you can talk about 16 without talking about a number of factors in the media landscape that are totally gendered. One is that the, me too movement started in July of 2016 when Gretchen Carlson sued Roger Ailes, who is at the time the chief communications advisor to president Trump. That was the beginning of me too. And when you think about who the journalists were, many of whom were the most visible on television in some of the debates.

Lauren Leader: And in some of the interviews, a number of those men then got caught up in me too and have lost their jobs since. And there are a number of women now who are ascendant in their journalism careers now for 2020, um, whose careers in many ways have been enabled because some of the guys that didn't belong there got booted. And I think that is different. We still have less than 30% of newsrooms are female, less than 30% of the on air talent across most of media is female. If you want to get into these numbers, enjoy some time on the women's media center website where I spend a lot of time, uh, but we, we've got to call this stuff out the, there was a lot of of gender issues that overlaid a huge amount of what happened in 16 including a total underestimation of the views of conservative women.

Lauren Leader: And I'm going to get to your question cause it's connected the views of conservative women across America who never saw the sort of democratic feminism as their story. And that goes straight back to Phyllis Schlafly and the end of era. There's a real line between conservative women in America who were very uncomfortable with Hillary Clinton, Hillary Clinton and a narrative over many years, um, which has said, you know, politics and feminism is the domain of women on the left. So we are a non, we are one of the only nonpartisan women's political education organizations in America. And, and we are even in this wildly polarized time because we're trying to get to women who

have been on the margins of the political process, who either see it as so hopelessly broken that they don't show up, they don't participate or who will pay attention to absolutely everything else. But politics, even when politics runs right through their lives.

Lauren Leader: Right. And in some instances we train a lot of survivors of domestic violence. For instance, you know, that's one in three American women. Well we can't reauthorize the violence against Women Act. There's multiple pieces of legislation that are presidential candidates and congressional candidates and everyone in Congress, a fact that women think of nothing to do with their lives. So all of this is part of the same picture, which is that women are the majority of the electorate. They outvote man, they've outvoted men in every election since 1980 and yet in every major cycle we seem to forget that until something big happens that makes us pay attention to it. Um,

John Dickerson: so just quickly, let me follow up on that though. So when you talk about the disconnect between voters and their self interest in this case, so in this case we're talking about women voters. One of the challenges for people covering campaigns is covering what people are actually interested in and what they should be or what people think they should be. You often have candidates talking to the economic self interest of Canada, of, of voters. And the voters will vote against their economic self interest, whether it's working class voters who vote for uh, uh, candidates who don't particularly care about them or very wealthy people who vote to have their taxes raised. How easy do you see is, is it to make the argument on substantive grounds that changes people's kind of initial feelings, which often can be kind of gut level emotional,

Lauren Leader: right? Yeah. I mean, I'm with the, I think that the emotional piece of this is just a neat, we wildly underestimated how big of a factor that is. I mean, look, I think most Americans, a couple of things, look, we have a, we have a civics crisis in America. Americans do not understand how our political process works. Okay. 70% of Americans cannot name a single person that represents them in elected office. 70% okay. So we then go out and try and have these conversations with voters that are about sort of primarily most of the polls. We were just talking about this, it sort of asks people rank the issues that mattered to you most. Is it abortion? Is it healthcare? Is it the economy? But I just think that like from the time, the time that I spend with so many people in the heartland of America, you know, mostly women, but when I talked to them about their politics, like they just don't think about it in those linear terms. Like it is this kind of emotional piece. There is a very, they want that personal connection. There's something else that people are making their decisions on, which I'm not sure we've really unpacked as much as we should. And I think we really have to for this cycle

John Dickerson: is the voter the one who should be driving the bus always in campaign coverage. So, um, you know, obviously when the republic was created, the idea of a direct democracy was as frightening as the idea of a monarch. So the idea that

journalists go to listen, talk to voters, listen to what they have to say and what they care about is obviously an important part of the picture. But what if the voters don't understand the major issues that can only be decided through collective action in American government? What is the responsibility of the press to say, here are the five issues that are the most important ones, and that can only be solved by a president. Working with a congress is that obligation. 10% of the job, 5% of the job, 50% of the job.

Robert Costa: You have to cover the full scope of American politics. If you're going to be a political news organization or a television show, you have to cover the candidates and you have to cover the voters and you have to cover the issues within that. You try to explain, and we do this on PBS, we do this at the Washington Post fact checks and explainers, whether it's in the written form or the televised form to try to inform the audience about in a nonpartisan way about why issues are unfold in certain ways on policy grounds, what the history is of those issues. But I don't, I'm not really sure of your question, John. Are you saying to just ignore the voter if they don't understand the issue? No, no, no,

John Dickerson: no. I'm saying in the, in the great, we the in the great, uh, feast of elections, right? What size is the, basically the vegetable portion, which is, here's our, here's our five part series on issue x, which is really important because it has, the stakes are really high, whether it's China, whether it's cyber warfare, whether it's climate, whether it's income inequality, something you might not get at a rope line you might not get when you talk to voters. You might not hear the candidates talking about it. The idea of shared sacrifice doesn't get talked about a lot. Um, and if you use it, a news organizations obligation to say, we objected. We know these are important to see things.

Robert Costa: So I would disagree with your characterization to them as vegetables and be in this way. If they're presented poorly, they will be vegetables to the vote or into the reader. Well, dessert, whatever I just note portion does what my point is, if the responsibility of news organizations to make sure that the product we're creating is compelling to people and informative. A too often. I see different news organizations struggle to make that content compelling and they say, well, will have a policy page and a fact check. This is a vigorous political system in this country, and the debate among the candidates is amazing. Right now, 25 Democrats, president Trump with his, his point of view, this debate on all these issues, we have foreign policy in this country. He's been totally offended. You have a president who's taken the democratic position on trade, who's adopted nationalism as is the core of his foreign policy.

Robert Costa: You have some Democrats now more hawkish on Russia and other issues on NATO. Then the Republican president, we should welcome this debate and not just sit back and say, oh, it's conflict. It's not conflict. If it's covered in a serious way through reporting, and this is, I think sometimes the gap in our industry is we think, oh, we need to have explainers and then there's just the game of politics. It's, it's not that cut and dry yet. We have to find a way to cover this

amazing foreign policy debate this week. Paul Ryan was here yesterday, the Republican Party walking away from entitlement reform, having all the power in Washington and just saying, no thanks. It's an amazing story. Let's present the story and stop saying, oh well we're just being good citizens by making this boring content to provide to the viewer. Then we're not doing our job. So there's a bit of a polling

Margie Omero: answer to this question because outlets will, the public polling will reflect what outlets think will make news, what they want to write about, what they think influences the dialogue. And you'll hear a lot of folks on Twitter, which is obviously real life say issue polling issue. Polling is bad, all issue polling is bad because they're looking at public issue polling that has one question, are you for stronger gun laws or are you pro choice or pro life or are you in favor of the green new deal? And because the, it's not to fault any of the outlets. They have a million other things that they need to do in their, in their polls. And that's what presumably somebody in the newsroom is saying, this is what we want to include in a story, but organizations who do internal polling, which folks may dismiss sometimes publicly because there's a d or our affiliation really want to figure out how to talk about these issues.

Margie Omero: We'll do very long surveys and really big focus group projects to really figure out should we talk about it this way? What if we talked about it this way? Where did, where did you get your information about this? But a lot of that stuff doesn't make it into the public dialogue and instead the outlets will have polling questions on, you know, there was one outlet in 18 that said, ask people who do you think is gonna win the house? Who Do you think is going to win the Senate? And then numbers were the same because voters don't know about the mapping out what the Senate map looks like versus what the house map looks like. Or it will say, well, should Democrats focus on more independence around their base? I mean a lot of these polling questions, we'll ask people to be political consultants rather than try to understand the depth of the issue, but it's out there. It's just less likely to be part of what the outlets do themselves and uncover.

John Dickerson: You mean, just let me ask you about social media. Um, should was one of the successes of 2016 that reporters were on Twitter all the time. What do you mean like success of 2016 I'm sorry, I was getting emotionally, I was being facetious. Yeah. Should tweet shit. Let me ask you a version of the polling question. Should reporters get off Twitter?

Margie Omero: Of course not. I think the president of the United States

Yamiche A: is literally making public policy issues, foreign policy issues on Twitter. I bought this Apple Watch because I was sleeping through news cycles because I wasn't waking up at five 30 in the morning when the president was tweeting about whatever he was tweeting about and waking up at six 30 and having literally missed in an entire news cycle. It's not healthy. I won't, I will. I'll give you that.

But I think what you need to have is, is is your ear to the ground and we should interject. Your job is to be all over everything he does. I mean, in other words, if you were covering the entire political race, you might not do that. But yeah, I think that either. I think either way being on Twitter is critically important. I would say. Even though they used to be this thing called Ombudsman, they had newspapers, they were basically public editors where they would actually look internally at the paper.

Yamiche A: Someone would be at the Washington Post or the New York Times and their job was to critique essentially the work of the New York Times or other places. I'm antiquated. I know what what, what is, what is happening now is that Twitter is in some ways serving that purpose. I think of black Twitter and I think of Ferguson, we would not have been able to cover Ferguson in the way we did had we not been on Twitter listening to people's stories from the ground. So I think it's critically important to be on Twitter because I think as a reporter it keeps you humble. No, I don't like when there are hundreds of thousands of people yelling at me saying all sorts of terrible things to me. But there's always that couple of tweets and when I look at them, let's say, you know what, maybe I should have worded that differently or maybe we should look into that differently.

Yamiche A: I think that we owe it as reporters for, for us to listen to people and to hear what they're saying. And I'll add one other thing. Um, there's this idea of you were talking about women and one and three of them being sexually assaulted. And I think what's important also when we look at kind of the way that people are living their lives. I remember after the access Hollywood tape, I ran down in North Carolina, I had a watch party with the Republican women to asking them about the access Hollywood tape. And they said, well, Donald Trump sounds like my husband and my dad, so I don't really care. And I thought to myself, isn't that a story? If we had the time. Isn't it a story to actually figure out why women are not bothered by the fact that someone would say that to you? I think that that's some of the things that you might get on Twitter. You might not, but I think to take it back, listening to what people are actually telling you, they're not telling you all, I'm not bothered by this Hollywood access tape. They're telling me, well, I've had to live with that and I've had to figure out how to deal with that. So why would I hold this person into a hot to a higher standard than I'm holding my own husband

Lauren Leader: there. There. Yeah, no way. I think we all would have versions of that story. Do you want to know? Look, I mean, I think it's real and I think, look, I am someone who believes that the, the, the gender dimension of our elections is vastly under reported rent large. Okay. Like blanket statement. Underreported underappreciated. I mean, I, you know, people like Howard d and God bless Howard Dina. I had to tell him some of the basic facts about, you know, how women's representation in the country we're not paying attention. And I think like the Roy Moore, uh, Doug Jones race is a perfect illustration of that. You know,

Lauren Leader: black women are the most civically engaged Americans. They are more likely to be weak. We, God is just truth. They are more likely to be registered to vote more, but likely to turn out at the polls than any other Americans. And they have been for the last 20 years. But we never covered that. We never heard about it. Americans didn't know that until the Roy Moore, until the Roy Moore Doug Jones race because black women turn that race and that was a nationally watched race. So across the board, like this is an election where we have six women that have qualified for the debates. Okay. I wrote a piece yesterday about this. There are four men that did not get all six women, including Maryanne Williamson, who's never run for office and has no political experience qualified for the debates. And Marianne Williamson qualified on both polling and contributions when a number of the men could only get one of those categories.

Lauren Leader: We don't hear about this. And I'm just going to say, I think this is one of these things that everyone needs to be watching this ball in this next election cycle. It is to your point like these are the stories that we're missing and we, they are 100% huge factor in how these elections get decided. Susan, let me ask you about fact checking. We are in the high age of fact checking it happens all the, it happens all the time. There's a lot more than 10 races ago that you were covering and certainly was more than when I started our fact checks a universal good or have some candidates learned that if you say something that's untrue, it'll get covered as in a fact check and the underlying untruth ends up being spread by the fact trick. So I think fact checks are important thing to do and we should keep doing them.

Susan Page: I think they are a force for good. Um, and, but what's changed about fact checking in in the 2016 election and now is it when it used to be, when you did a fact check and you found a politician said something that was wrong or run an ad that had an inaccuracy in it, they would stop saying it. And that is no longer the case. And what happens now is that, that is that the, is that the Trump core voters, you know, 35 or 40% of the electorate either don't believe the fact checker or don't care if the president is saying something that's inaccurate. Um, and both those things are, are distressing. Um, so I don't think we deal with this by not doing fact checks. I think one way we've now tried to do with this is by making fact checks an integral part of your daily news coverage.

Susan Page: So that for instance, uh, there was a time when, uh, there was, uh, the canard that Barack Obama wasn't born in the United States. And you might say, Donald Trump says Barack Obama wasn't born in the United States. And it'd be in the second paragraph that you'd say, Barack Obama says he was born in the United States. We stopped doing that, making it sound like they had equivalent statements. Right? Uh, and we, we started making the case that Barack Obama was born in the United States because we know that from looking at facts and in fact, we then started to put in the headline and in the lead of the story, that the statement was inaccurate. That Barack Obama was not born in the United States. And that is something we have learned to do to avoid repeating the

inaccuracy. Now sometimes it's hard on a complicated issue to put the correction in the headline, but that, but it is important I think, because some people will only read the headline. So you need to say debunk theory or inaccurately or untruth. Right? And that is something we have learned in the past four years.

Robert Costa: So Robert Costa, people would say, why don't you just say he lied. We do. But how often? Very often, daily. How, how am I the story? How many times does a politician lie that it gets framed as such. The reason I ask that is there's a study that was done recently about fake news and things that are actually fake news, not the thing you don't like and then call it fake news, which is a distinction, but as something that's actually made up, um, and the political scientists studied it and found that labeling something as fake news creates a response in readers where they see if something is not labeled as fake news, that it's then automatically true. So that in trying to be more rigorous about spotting false stories, they've created a situation which people when they don't see something called out as false, they'll believe is true.

Robert Costa: And as we know, something that's not entirely false does not necessarily make it true. So back to the question of, of lying, does it have to be called bad every time or is it just on the whoppers? No, you call out a lie when it's a lie and you explain why in a clear and straight forward way. At the Washington Post and on Washington week. We're not afraid to use the word lie, but you don't use the word lie in a political way. I'll tell you a quick story. In 2016 during the transition when president Trump was elected, Steve Bannon told a few reporters that their main enemy was the press and we asked why? Why is that? And he said, because the Democrats don't have power, the Democrats can subpoena us. The Democrats are older and they're just not an effective party. In his view.

Robert Costa: He said, we think every day about the press, and he said, every time we say speaking as a Trump administration, we say fake news. They are saying that not just to define the media in their eyes, they are actually trying as a strategy and he's articulated this to provoke the response, the defensive response. We are not fake news. Why do they do that? Bannon and others have said they do this because they want the media to be talking about the media. So the country only sees the media in a defensive crouch responding to the call of fake news and talking in an explaining defensive way about, that's not true. The media, in my personal view, must often resist the bait hold firm. When you have a lie from any party, whether it's president Trump or someone else, you call it out immediately. You calmly explain why it's a lie in a clear and straightforward way, and then you stop and You keep reporting where you live.

Robert Costa: In the in in the most charged time, at least I've ever seen in my lifetime, and all these political people want to do that. I covered day in and day out. Believe me, they want to politicize the press and so the press has to be so careful to not get pulled into this riptide where we become painted as political actors to be able to defend ourselves on the fake news charges, which are absurd. You have to

make sure you stay unemotional so you could actually present facts and people can say the press. We rely on them. They're not just people fighting about their reputation, they're people informing and illuminating our national discourse.

Speaker 6: Great.

Yamiche A: Can I go, go ahead. You mentioned, I will say one thing. I think that what Robert said is so critical. I also think that as a reporter, and I would say as someone who's watching this news, you also have to allow yourself to feel things and then move on. Because I think I think of the time that president Trump, I'm a patient is and both my parents were born in Haiti and he called Haiti at asshole country. Another time you said Haitians brought aids to this country and I remember thinking, okay, I'm going to cover this story. Do what I do. Say It's, you know, obviously a lie and then move on. And then I got a call from my aunt who was literally crying and she was crying because she immigrated to the United States in the 70s and remembers people saying she had aids. I remember people saying that and I think that as reporters we both have to be unemotional and say obviously that's fake.

Yamiche A: Obviously we can defend ourselves without being angry. But also understand that the reason why there is such raw times is because people are watching this and are emotionally touched by all the things that are going on, the children that are being separated from their families, all these different things. As a reporter, I think you have to somehow convey that you understand that people are feeling that way without getting, as you said, as Robert said, caught up in the argument. So as a reporter at the White House, I call, I, I, I, I pose questions to the president all the time. I never get angry or I'm never screaming at him. That's not my style. But I also have to understand that I have to check myself when I walk into the White House because I need to make sure that I'm not carrying any things that I heard or anything that I saw into the White House because it is the job. The job is to go in there and not be emotional. And I think sometimes people might think that that comes off as cold, but it's because we're really, they're trying to be focused on representing the people who will never make it to the White House, will never visit or see or be able to pose a question to the president.

Robert Costa: Okay. Or You, let me ask you about, um, we've got debates coming up. How do, uh, how does the press cover so many candidates in multiple

Margie Omero: night events with wisdom? You guys are gonna do a great job. So there are a couple of things. I make the debates complicated. The first is who qualifies for the debates, which is something I've followed pretty closely. Um, the debate polling the threshold, which is not oppressed. That's the dncs rule. That's not oppressed rule, that's not nbcs rule. Um, looks at a horse race number. It looks at a head to head number of, you know, an entire listed list of candidates. It excludes an open ended question, which is the kind of the Washington Post has. It excludes other kinds of things that you might look at to examine which

candidates are stronger than others. Like favorability or hard Id. It, it, it has a, it doesn't compare, you know, some of them have smaller sample sizes cause there are primary sample within a larger national survey.

Margie Omero: So it's fraught. But it is spurred an enormous amount of polling coverage just on these questions. I mean the number of stories about the polls themselves to qualify the debate as you know, is astounding. Um, and you know, I think so, sorry, just to interrupt because the polls are supposed to be some kind of reflection of status within the democratic, right. But we're making differences between less than 1%, 1%, 2% in, you know, a poll that has 400 approximately democratic primary voters in it. And you know, it's, I mean is that, you know, it's a way to figure it out, but it's also a window that started in January. Not before. I mean there was a variety of different rules and I understand that there are cutoffs for all of them, but it makes it a challenge for, you know, it is, it is an imperfect way of assessing candidates strengths.

Margie Omero: Um, and this is not your question but just to carry on the debate piece, but at the same time you have the donor threshold, which is, you know, then led candidates and spend a lot of time trying to cultivate dollar donations, you know, online as opposed to, you know, some of the other ways that people might try to generate support. Now what it means for the press and how they cover different candidates. I mean, you see candidates rise and fall nationally by pretty small margins but still rising and falling. How much of that comes from press coverage? I mean, are people, are people meeting Pete [inaudible] in their neighborhood or are they reading a lot of news coverage and watching a lot of clips of him? Now that's not to take away from his talents, but you know, how, what, what should the press, if the press put that amount attention on another candidate, what, what happened to that other candidate?

Margie Omero: We don't know that it's a huge field. And I know that's complicated with all the resources involved, but um, you have that combination of a very strict set of polling rules, a large field, a few candidates getting a lot of coverage. And it makes it really difficult for voters to really figure out, you know, to have a real assessment. Two thirds of voters saying they're not really paying, a lot of primary voters aren't paying attention. Lauren, I'd pick you up. You want to jump on that, but let me ask you this question, add to it or just ignore it all together and say what you were going

John Dickerson: to say. Um, happens to me all the time. It's what you learn in TV. I learned that at home. Um, the um, let's say, uh, you have a candidate who has a hot hand, has as a moment on a rope line. It gets all this coverage. Suddenly we're all talking about the moment on the rope line show showed authenticity. And then there's another candidate who's doing the diligent work of addressing the issues that are facing the country, who has a set of attributes that are suited to the job. But people just aren't that excited about, um, what does the press do with those two instances?

Lauren Leader: Ah, well I'm glad I'm not a journalist and this election cycle because I think it's a really tough question. I mean, look, the challenge that we have right now, and this is a little bit back to your original point about vegetables, right? You know, we have a very poorly informed electorate generally and you know, I do a lot of TV and you know, the conversations part of, you talked about like what this sort of drive for news to be entertaining and draw people as well as be informative. And you know, I definitely feel that it is, I think a lot of people in this room, you'd probably a great swung towards the entertaining in a big way, in a way from the informing and those stories, those hot moments. I can't tell you how many times they get called and you know, get asked to spend 15 minutes on a show talking about one of these relatively irrelevant things when there's like massive issues happening around the world that we're not covering.

Lauren Leader: I mean we've, we've cut back on the coverage of foreign but foreign affairs, right? We have very few journalists that ever, that are working overseas than ever get air time to talk about international issues. You know, exceptions being at places like PBS and others. But he, in most of the news, it is those salacious kind of hot moments that are ratings draws at that wind up being every single show, you know, for the first, like seven hours of a Saturday morning as opposed to, you know, going deep on issues. And so I, I really think it's, it's hard for the electorate and most of them are not on Twitter. Uh, they're not getting, they're getting very limited news. And so when you go out and you ask people, what do you know about these candidates? You know, all they have to go on in some cases is these very, you know, superficial moments. And, and that is where I, I really hope for all of us that we can swing back the other way. There was too much at stake in this election for it to all just be about, you know, gaffs and hot moments on the line. Like we've gotta push ourselves harder to recognize the power that we have to help people understand more deeply.

Susan Page: But you know, John, if a candidate is, has talking about solutions and has all the attributes that he or she would need to be president, they're able to make a connection with voters. Uh, and so if a candidate is making a lot of intellectual arguments and not connecting with voters, they do not have the job skills. They need to be elected president of serverpress president. Uh, and we see candidates like Elizabeth Warren have been an example who is talking with her calling card is how specific she is on a whole range of issues, how many plans she has. She has a plan for that. I'm sure we're going hear that, uh, on Wednesday night. Uh, and that, so, so that's, that's the task people [inaudible] obsession with the hot moment on a rope line. It's true that, that, that's true. But that's especially true for cable tree TV. And it is less true for all the other ways, all the other kinds of media, uh, including, uh, Bryn outlets and a non cable TV. I mean, that is the special sauce that gets the audience that is most interested in watching cable treat B. That's not everybody. And that's not all media.

John Dickerson: Yes. And so thinking back to 2016, a lot of people would say that cable and broadcast television and print to a lesser degree just couldn't pull away from Donald Trump and that, that, so feed that into your

Susan Page: well, and it's certainly true, although I think Kate, I think take cable TV was the biggest offender by taking Donald Trump rallies because they were, you know, kind of mesmerizing. That was certainly true. And more so than Hillary Clinton rallies. So yes, I think, and I think it's a lesson that we have, we struggled to learn to not be distracted by every provocative tweet because one of the things we've seen the president do is whenever there's a storyline that is damaging to him or that he doesn't like, he'll tweet something that is so provocative. You cannot not write about it because the president United States is saying something that is extraordinary. But what I think we have tried to learn is that you cannot have that be the only thing that takes your attention. You give it some attention, but you also try to keep your eye on the ball.

John Dickerson: Um, Bob, I'm giving you all the, uh, ethical journalistic puzzlers tonight for which I apologize, but, um, in the 2016 race when the intelligence agencies as the u s government said that the information given wikileaks was, was given to wikileaks by the Russian intelligence services, uh, Marco Rubio said, I'm not going to talk about this in the campaign context. He said, because this is the Russians messing with our election. This was happening in real time in the election. And we all, I asked about wikileaks, a lot of people in the press asked about wikileaks in the material contained they're in and what it did or didn't say about the Clinton campaign or even just about it in general. Do you think in the same circumstances now in 2020, how would the press react differently to material that was obviously ill gotten, but that was having uh, playing a role in the, in the race. I mean the, the nominee of the Republican party was saying, everybody go look at wikileaks. What, what, what does the press do? The Washington Post reported on the wikileaks leak because it was news and we did not indulge in it in some kind of tabloid story, but you covered it as a political story in the last few years. Thankfully news organizations like my own have been able to become more informed about deep fakes about the way fake news operates, the way foreign are interfering on social

Robert Costa: media. So there's a higher level of knowledge right now in the news media about how to handle these types of difficult stories when you're dealing with information that may be illegally obtained or obtained through foreign actors. But the idea of walking away from it that you can't walk away from news, but you can do a better job of covering it. Okay. So I had a quick point on 2016 that I always get told by some voters when I'm out on the campaign trail that Donald Trump, president Trump was covered too much in 2016 it's not true. He was maybe air too much on television in terms of cable TV. He was not covered enough. We started covering him in 2015 at the Washington Post. We put him on the front page. We were laughed at for putting them on the front page because people said he's not serious.

Robert Costa: It doesn't matter if people are perceived as serious or not. We started covering birtherism. We covered it all up until election day. His birth or history, he demanded more serious coverage of his finances. David Fahrenthold, who sits next to me at the post, broke the access Hollywood story and won a Pulitzer for the Trump foundation. President Trump demanded more coverage, news coverage, investigative coverage, and he should have been taken more seriously sooner. You can argue about the television coverage, but someone brought up, Mary brought Maryann Williamson, one of you, right? You brought up Marianne Williamson. People laugh at her campaign. They say, oh, she's, she's a little out there. She demands coverage. She's on the debate stage. This is another assumption. Marianne Williamson. Oh she's, she's going to go nowhere. Who says who says in this broken system,

Yamiche A: three articles on the end of Kirsten Gillibrand campaign. I mean, she's been declared dead now by three different major news outlets, right? Cause she didn't raise the money that they expected. So the three papers are you the Atlantic, the political, political and the Washington Post all wrote basically postmortems on her campaign. And yet she's in the debate. We're gonna open it up for questions in a second. You mentioned it looked like you were about to jump in and say something and then we'll turn it to the audience. So I have two quick points. The first days I remember being on the Bernie guys and the Bernie Sanders, his campaign bus rather. Um, and, and coming home or coming back to hotels and being dead tired and then turning on CNN just to see what was going on in the world and being stuck watching Donald Trump for like an hour losing sleep, wondering what in the world is going on.

Yamiche A: TV. I can't, I really struggle with the idea of like maybe he shouldn't have been on TVs so much because it was something that you really wanted to watch. Like it was like, wait, what is going on? Who is this person? How is he saying this stuff? He's calling in when people couldn't get Hillary Clinton on the phone or she couldn't do press conferences and Donald Trump is calling and MSNBC and other places talking for hours. I think the lesson of the 2016 campaign is also two candidates. If you see someone getting a bunch of attention, you need to make yourself available because Hillary Clinton was hard to get an interview with. She was hard to get hold of press conference for and that's part of the issues that we, that I think led to that coverage. We this year having to face the nation all the time people would say, why didn't you book x, Y, and z because we call it x, y, and Z. And they don't want to talk because talking out loud is something they don't want to do in front of a camera.

Yamiche A: Look at Buddha judge, right? Why is Buddha judge where he is? Booty judge. Did every single press interview, every request? He said yes. And people say, well, how? How does he come out of nowhere in south bend? Because in this environment to give me shit, it's point. You have to be ubiquitous to have a presence. That's not fair. It's not right. Probably in a lot of people's views. But that's how it is. And then the other quick thing I was going to say was about, um, you were asking about wikileaks and how they would be covered. I, it

makes me kind of cringe as a reporter. If wikileaks put out every single year of Donald Trump's tax returns, they probably get covered. Even if reporters knew that it was obtained illegally. I'm willing to bet that someone out there doesn't matter what news organizations, someone would be writing those stories, they would get picked up and then maybe we start talking about it on television. I think I'm, I'm not convinced that reporters and media organizations won't say this. This information was obtained illegally. We can't cover it. I just don't think it would happen. Oh yeah. No, I don't think it would either. It's just the charges that the, the organizations become the handmaidens of, you know, the Russians essentially. All right. Let's, um, here's a question here. Nope.

Audience Member: Hi. Good evening. My name is Christian. Um, I have a question about, uh, your opinion about the role that the Latino vote in the 2020 presidential election just coming off of the 2018 midterms. Uh, I look at the seven congressional districts in my state of California and how they were overturned primarily because Latino voter turnout, young Latino voter turnout came out in record numbers. And you know, there are 32 million eligible Latino voters at the next election, the neck, the largest ethnic group. But I don't hear anything about it and I don't hear any other candidates making the active effort to court the Latino about, so I'd love to hear any of your thoughts about that.

Lauren Leader: Yeah, I mean I've been preaching to everybody that I can will listen to me that this election is going to turn on the enthusiasm of of women, Latino voters and young people and and that as it did in many ways for Obama is going to be the decider. It will not be elected an election that is one on just Andy Trump. It is going to require mass mobilization, a huge amount of energy from folks who have been historically more on the margins of the voting population, but who's showed in 80 and that they could show up and be a be a force. One thing that's really different in this cycle from 16 is that since 60 and there have been dozens and dozens of grassroots voter mobilization organizations all over America targeting a thousand pockets of voters that were not engaged in 16 and working to get them registered. We've had corporations working to get their employees and their customers registered. So I think that they are a huge force and that they will be the factor. The folks who have in the past not been the deciders. Their turnout I think is going to be everything

Yamiche A: going to Lauren's point about Doug Jones in Alabama, part of Doug Jones, his ability to get black women to vote for him was that he showed a history of being interested in civil rights issues. He had been interested in prosecuting the murders of the four black girls who were killed in that church. Mommy, if you're a candidate that's going to show up and start speaking Spanish and say, Hey, I'm really interested in you, where are your receipts? Like what were you doing four years ago? I think that's gonna be a big question this year.

Margie Omero: So I think, so we, we have an office in Albuquerque and we've been studying, we've been doing a lot of national work to figure out best practice for studying Latino voters. Ha. Like the questions you ask, uh, the economic issues that folks

care about. I think there's this misconception around the country that Latino voters only care about immigration and that for everybody who's not Latino, they are all against immigration. And that's as simple as it is. And neither of those things are true. There are consensus positions on immigration that Republicans could get on board, certainly could have in a different climate with a different president, but beforehand and hopefully can again, but their voters are open to it. There's certainly a lot of consensus positions in Latino voters are not a monolith. They have a variety of different issues that they care about. But obviously when you have a president who you know, treats children at the border in such horrendous conditions, it's, it's hard for that to not be a top issue, not just for Latino voters, but for a lot of voters around the country.

Susan Page: And you know, by the way, the boy does is not giving up on Latino voters. Did they do not assume that every Latino voter that shows up is going to vote for a Democrat, which is when reasoned you hear the president talk about a record low Hispanic unemployment record, low African American deployment on some cultural issues. I think the point house thinks, uh, the president has a case to make with Latino voters. Um, so it's, uh, it's as, as Margie was saying, a a more, it's a complicated electorate and the issue with the Latino voters in the past has been often not where they stand, but will they show up? And the one question that you're going to hear a lot of democratic contenders talk about is who has a message that will make the voters who could make a difference make the difference, but only if they turn out.

Speaker 6: Yeah.

Audience Member: Um, hi. So, uh, one of the main issues I personally found with the media coverage in 2016 was the fact that in this desire to not be accused of being political, what they do is they would inflate a pseudo scandal, like the Hillary Clinton email situation to make it look like it was almost equivalent to the 100 legitimate, uh, you know, scandals that Donald Trump faced. And I feel like you see that same kind of thing happening with the Elizabeth Warren DNA test, all these kinds of things. So my question is, how do you think the media will approach it any differently in 2020 in this desire to not to seem like they're so fair to make sure they don't create a false equivalence?

Speaker 6: Great.

Yamiche A: Yeah, I was, I was just talking to someone about this today. I think a lot of people are worried that Donald Trump is going to somehow be the standard and that it's, and that if you have it been accused of raping a woman or you haven't been accused of calling for the death of the death penalty for five wrongfully convicted black and Latino Boys, that you somehow get a path. So there were so many people who Elizabeth Warren's DNA test was a bad thing. It just was not a lot of people thought it was just rolled out poorly. A lot of people took real offense to Joe Biden talking about the civil, more times of Democrats who literally called for the death of negroes all across the country to call them

segregationist is like a nice way to put it. They were calling for black people to be murdered and for people that look like me, to not be on the earth anymore. So as much as democrats I think are worried about kind of in conflating things that might look small to some people. I think there are lot of people who were also worried that somehow Donald Trump, it comes to standard and it's like, oh, well as long as Joe Biden hasn't raped somebody, he's, he's okay. He'll, he'll, he can get a pass for whatever he does. I think there's, it's a hard wait. It's a hard thing to cover, but I think that that's what a lot of Democrats are worried about.

Robert Costa: Oh, here's a question.

Audience Member: I, I have a, I have a question. So, um, I've heard that the Latino vote or Latinex vote may turn the election or the black vote or the female vote if they were only either. These women will only learn what they should learn. Uh, I'm a white male that does my vote too, can have a say in the election or should I stay home?

Yamiche A: Okay.

Robert Costa: If you look at the 2018 elections, Democrats had high expectations for what would happen in Georgia and the gubernatorial race with Stacey Abrams, Andrew Gillum running in Florida and Beto O'Rourke running in Texas. Those were the races where top democratic strategists expected if they were able to get a strong Latino turnout, strong African American turnout, they could really start to come back a little bit of a blue wave in the south and ahead of 2020 start to eat into president Trump's territory. And one of the takeaways I'd love to hear the polling perspective on this is that when I was down there covering 2018 you saw high turn out among those core groups for the Democrats. But you also saw enormous turnout among some of the core white voters for Republicans who were in those states, stoked by president Trump on issues like trade and immigration. So when you ask as a white man, do you matter in the political calculus, you certainly do. This White House believes its voters, white and others, but majority white in many of these states, uh, need to be electrified, not just motivated, electrified for him to have a chance at winning the electoral college again in 2020 and so expect you to be targeted constantly if you're right of center in particular on those issues.

Speaker 6: [inaudible]

Robert Costa: well, if you don't want to, what do you mean? I mean, of course your vote matters. Yes.

Yamiche A: I mean, there are a lot of closed door conversations among Democrats about, you know, do we focus on the diversity of our party or do we need to focus on areas that we lost and rural and exurban white men who feel, you know, left out of political debate.

Margie Omero: And the answer is all of the above. That, that we don't have to choose that if we have a message right now, we have, you know, there is a message, we have an incredible crisis of leadership and in crisis of our governments. And that the number one issue that people say is facing the country is not the economy. But then we have political dysfunction that transcends party lines. We have this, you know, massive crisis that galvanizes all democrats and that, you know, that includes the diversity of our party, which is finally getting a little bit of the political power that it deserves. Um, as well as, you know, folks who have traditionally been in power.

Robert Costa: One last question. Oh, I'd see one. Yes.

Audience Member: Great. Um, I think it was Robert Costa mentioned the institutional, uh, um, the decline in America's, um, trust in certain institutions, not on your list was the media, which I think is down there in terms of favorability with the congress. So my question goes to why that is and could it perhaps be because there's this breathless hair on fire coverage about things like the Covington boys that was promoting a certain narrative that maybe the media wanted promoted or for example, the Jessie Smollett story, which did the same and does that account perhaps for the fact that the media is among those institutions that's lost favor the country.

Robert Costa: The media is institutional integrity. Is that a very fragile moment? I would agree with you. I should've included it in my list. I'm not here to speak on behalf of every news organization. All I can say is I believe personally you have to dedicate yourself to nonpartisan coverage because it is so easy to get pulled into conventional wisdom or into news stories that are not fully documented. The rush on social media to make an assumption or to make a conclusion is always out there as a temptation in this business, and I just know at Washington Week and Washington Post, we try to take a pause to digest what's happening and to report so much of what's happened in the media. The media used to be a pretty partisan organization back in the late 19th century. The early 20th century was really only post Moreau. That isn't the idea of a nonpartisan press started to exist.

Robert Costa: Even the Washington Post, most national newspapers, they were political Oregon's, they were partisan organizations. It was after World War II and that this nonpartisan atmosphere really took hold for the better and it's not something that's guaranteed the media in England very partisan. Often that's the history in the UK. We could easily see this nonpartisan veneer and core of the media fall away if it's not protected day in, day out and move back, revert to this partisanship in the media and that's why it takes commitment and dedication and also not being allowed to become political or just to make decisions in a rash way. Being part of as a news organization, a lot of you hear corporate leaders. It's like being part of any company. You have to do your due diligence. You have to have leadership. It's not that hard. It's not, it's not some kind of crazy equation. It's the basics. Do the basics. Right,

Yamiche A: so you mentioned the Covington boys and you mentioned Jessie Smollett. I would also say there's a central park. Five were so were five black young and brown boys. Basically we're, we're told in the media were described in the media as wild animals going after a white woman. I think that for a long time there've been communities in this country that have not, that have looked at the media and said, that's not who they are. Not representing who I am for African Americans seeing mugshot after mugshot on their local TV news stations when they know that that's not who they were raising in our home for Latinos, for gay people, all sorts of people who are watching the TV saying, that's not who we are. I think that that, that, that trust in the media is now spreading or that that questioning of the trust in the media is now spreading across the country.

Yamiche A: But I think as a reporter who's covered race for a long time, I've never gone into someone's home thinking, this person inherently trusts me. I think that journalists everyday should be earning to trust that every day we should be doing our jobs, doing the due diligence that Bob is talking about. And that's the only way. And to be humble, we have to be humble. When you make a mistake and you say, you know what, that wasn't the best way we could do that. Let me tell you how I should have done that, because I think if we don't do that and we act as though the media somehow cannot have any flaws, then we're doing a disservice to that. But I think that we should all be critically worried if the media is, is starting to be something that people completely don't trust anymore. And that's the last word. Thank you to all of you and thanks to all of you for being here.