Podcast Transcript

The Cloakroom with Peter Roskam: 2024 Republican National Convention

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Rubenking: Welcome to The Cloakroom with Peter Roskam. Former Congressman Peter Roskam leads BakerHostetler's Federal Policy team. On today's podcast, Peter turns from the latest legislative developments on Capitol Hill to politics and the campaigns for the White House and Congress.

Peter is joined by Jim Ellis, a 35-year veteran of federal politics and election forecasting. Jim is the founder of Ellis Insight, a nonpartisan firm that tracks campaigns and elections. On the podcast, Peter and Jim discuss President Joe Biden ending his campaign, the Republican National Convention, and the selection of Senator JD Vance as Trump's vice presidential running mate, and how all of that will impact this fall's elections for the White House and Congress.

Let's listen in to The Cloakroom with Peter Roskam.

Roskam: Well, all you got to do is open up your iPhone, and you see some new cascading news that is just breathtaking in its scope. One thing after another and now we have Joe Biden's announcement that he is not going to be pursuing the Democratic nomination for President of the United States, deferring to his vice president, Kamala Harris. And it's got a massive ripple effect across the entire political landscape, and we need to talk about the Republican convention last week that followed the assassination attempt on Donald Trump.

So, Jim, what do you make of this? It is a sprint right now, 100-plus days to Election Day. How do you even begin to calculate what the state of the race is right now?

Ellis: It is extraordinary, really, Peter, when you think of it, how much has happened in such a short amount of time. We had the Biden debate performance, then the assassination attempt on former President Trump, the Republican convention, and now President Biden dropping out of the race. It's all happened in just three weeks, and it is really incredible how much has happened in such a short amount of time. And the trajectory of the race, how much is it changing? It is hard to say at this early juncture. Early polls, the snap flash polls suggest not too much. Trump still has about the same type of lead over Harris that he did over Biden. So, it is, the ball is in the Democratic Party's court right now, and they've got to put something together pretty quick to get their campaign back on the right track and get back on the offense as opposed to now they're going to be playing some defense here for a while.

And I think Trump is actually sounding the right type of response on this and taking it out of a candidate perspective and still keeping it on the record. He was saying it doesn't matter who their nominee is, their record is still bad and then starts talking about the economy, the border, and crime. So, I think from that perspective that is the right move.

Roskam: It seems to me, Jim, that both sides, both campaigns, both parties have been demonstrating irrational exuberance over the past little while. After listening to the Republicans finishing up the convention in Milwaukee, it just felt as if they were communicating this is going to be a clean sweep. I think the choice of JD Vance as Donald Trump's vice presidential pick was basically a pick that said, listen, we've got this thing in the bag, and I can pick whoever I need to pick and not worry about expanding the map. So, there was exuberance there.

On the Democratic side, since President Biden's announcement of stepping back, since his endorsement of his vice president, Kamala Harris and you see the money flowing, you see the volunteers now coming on, and they're now feeling, I think, communicating nearly an irrational exuberance of, hey, we've got this guy, Trump. We've got him right where we want him, and this is exactly the way we hope things are going to play out. It seems to me that there is a whole lot of campaign left in this thing, and it is really an open question as to who prevails. What do you think?

Ellis: Oh yes, I think it is far from over. And yeah, I'm not sure that I would say the Democrats are in a situation of exuberance. I still think Kamala Harris is the weakest person they could put up. And when in comparison to some of the governors and Senator Mark Kelly, who have been mentioned as potential vice presidential picks, I think all of them are stronger than Harris, but they really have no choice but to go with Harris. I think there is a huge uproar at the convention if they try to not go with her. She is the vice president, the first woman of color that is the vice president and they, from the democratic side, that is a huge deal for

them. And for them to try to move her out of the way, I think they will really bust their party wide open. And so therefore, I don't think they'd do that.

And therefore, I think Trump has who he wants as opposed to Biden. And I think Trump is really in the driver's seat here. The Democrats are a little bit behind, and they've got to make up some ground, a lot of ground really, very quickly and it is going to be a challenge for them to do that, I think.

Roskam: How do they do that between now and the convention in Chicago in, third week in August? What are the steps that they've got to take, in your opinion?

Ellis: I think they've really got to get back on track. They need to get an issue agenda. I don't think any of their problems on the issues are solved now. In fact, I think the border situation is even more intense because remember, she was assigned as the border czar and assigned to go down and try to make that situation better, which she didn't. She didn't even go down there. And so, I think they've got some wide vulnerabilities on the border issue, which is overwhelmingly a positive issue for the Republicans. And also, Trump has a very good contrast as to how he handled the border situation versus the Democrats, and so, the borders issue doesn't go away. And then, he is still going to of course continue to pound on the economy, on crime, and on the foreign affairs I think is a big deal.

Peter, you would know this a lot better than me with your service in the House. It seems that she would portray a very weak position of the United States with some of the comments she's made. Remember the video we saw, and we will see this one over and over and over when she described Ukraine as being a small country next to the big country, Russia. We, that will be back ad nauseam, I think. So I think her record on foreign affairs could be something that makes people a little nervous and that all plays into Trump's hands. So right now, I think that Trump certainly has the advantage. And they're, the Democrats are going to need, I think, a big Trump mistake to really get back into this in a major way, and that is certainly possible. So, as you said, we've got a long way to go in this campaign, and it is nowhere near being over.

Roskam: It does seem, I'm agreeing with you Jim. It does seem like the Democrats' vulnerability is if this becomes a referendum on the border and if it becomes a referendum on the, a quote, and I'm using air quotes, cover up of Joe Biden's physical capacity, that is bad for the Democrats. What they want to do is flip the script and make it a referendum on Donald Trump as unworthy of the office, threat to democracy, and so forth. And there and I assume that the Democrats are going to talk a lot about abortion rights during this campaign, and those, I mean the contrast is just breathtaking. So, take a step back. Who is in the mix? Who do you think would buoy the Harris ticket the most of the names that are out there?

Ellis: Yeah. Oh, I have a good point on that, but let me make one point too in response to what you just said, and that is on democracy before we talk about the VP. I think the Democrats are certainly now in a much weaker position on democracy when they have just ignored the votes of 14 million people that voted for Joe

Biden. I thought he made a very good point about that when they, he was talking about staying on the ballot. I mean, 14 million people had voted for him for renomination and to cast aside all of those ballots because we don't think now he can win. So, we as the party elite is going to tell you you're going to support Kamala Harris, that flies in the face of their argument that Donald Trump is the threat to destroy democracy. So I think we'll see a little bit less talk on that. I think you're absolutely right on the abortion issue. They're really going to come out hard on that.

Roskam: Well, Jim, let's get down to it, and let's talk about these vice presidential picks that Kamala Harris could make. What do you make of them? Mark Kelly, Governor Cooper from North Carolina, Governor Beshear from Kentucky, Governor Shapiro from Pennsylvania, how do you think they would play out?

Ellis: Well, I think the one I would eliminate right off the top is Governor Beshear in Kentucky, because I don't see any way that Trump loses Kentucky regardless of who the VP nominee for the Democrats is. The other states where we've got Pennsylvania, Arizona, North Carolina, of course all those are critical battleground states. Right now, Pennsylvania is polling the closest. Trump is ahead in all three. He's had a substantial lead in Arizona for quite a while. His North Carolina numbers he, Trump, looked pretty strong for him. Then Pennsylvania, I think, is really always a critical state. And I would think that Governor Shapiro would probably bring the most to the ticket of the group mentioned, and, because of where he comes from and his popularity level in that state. But I think this is going to be a good test to see if the vice presidential nominee of any party can actually bring in votes, or is it just simply a vote for the top of the ticket in most people's minds.

Roskam: So, let's shift gears, and let's look at the Republican convention in Milwaukee that finished up last week. It seemed to me that it was a clear demonstration that this is Donald Trump's party. All the acrimony from 2016 was gone. It was basically a Trumpfest and some interesting head nods out to other constituencies. How did it strike you in terms of preparation for a general election?

Ellis: I have to give them high marks. What I have been critical of the Republican side for through the 2022 election and earlier this year is not having a really a coherent message that was future looking. And I thought they did that at this convention. Concentrating, I thought their theme nights were really good to have a theme night on wealth building, one on the border, one on security, crime, and then zeroing in on the foreign affairs. I thought their honoring of those thirteen soldiers who were killed in Afghanistan, I thought that was extremely strong the way they did that.

And you're right, Peter. I mean, it was a very different convention from the one that originally nominated Trump in 2016 where there was clear division and this was a united convention that came away from Milwaukee, I think in pretty strong shape. So, I'd have to give them an A for how they handled the convention.

Roskam: Thought it was interesting too, the full-throated defense of the U.S.-Israeli relationship and any number of times that was referenced to the hostages in Gaza being acknowledged, the head of the Republican Jewish coalition giving, addressing the audience and it seems like the invitation to Vice, or to Prime Minister Netanyahu to address Congress. It is an invitation that came from Speaker Mike Johnson. These are very forward-leaning overtures towards this relationship. How do you think that will impact the race in any of these key states?

Ellis: Well, I think it is, it certainly will. And that Palestinian question, as we've talked in the past about particularly Michigan and in maybe to a degree in Minnesota. But I think Michigan is front and center on that issue. And so, yeah, I think it will have a major factor in how this presidential race actually unfolds. Because as we know, particularly if Trump remains solid in Georgia, Arizona, and Nevada, he needs any one state, any one more state anywhere to go over the top to give him the national victory. And certainly, front and center on that list of potential conversion states from the old Biden number, Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin are at the top of that list.

And so if Michigan were to flip, that would be enough for Trump because again, in those three southern tier states of Georgia, Arizona, Nevada, Trump is looking pretty strong. And it is unlikely I think that Harris is going to be able to flip those back. So we're headed for a real tight election again, and any issue like the one you just mentioned, the American-Israel relations, could definitely play a major role in how the eventual outcome unfolds.

Roskam: It is interesting, I mentioned earlier that I thought Donald Trump's pick of Ohio Senator JD Vance was a pick that communicated that Trump thinks he's got this election in the bag and that it was not a gesture to reach out, to expand the base. It was communicating, I'm going to win, and this is all about legacy and so forth.

What do you make of Vance as a candidate or as a pick? He did underperform the governor of Ohio back in the 2022 cycle when Mike DeWine did much better than JD Vance did, and it was only millions of dollars that Mitch McConnell and his super PAC poured in that pulled Vance across the finish line. What do you make of that?

Ellis: Yeah. I think, however, Vance has improved a lot as a candidate from that time. I agree, I thought he underperformed in that race. But if you just look at him, he definitely seems ready. He's lost a lot of weight, he's, his beard and hair are perfectly trimmed. And it is clear he's been getting a lot of speech coaching, I think, and has really paid attention to that for professional help. So, I think he is a different candidate. I do think he brings something to the ticket from a political context, and I know Trump said he had three, really, three check marks for his VP. One, that someone he was personally comfortable with and obviously Vance fits that mode. Someone that would help him govern and obviously he thinks that Vance can do that. And someone that helps on the political spectrum as well. And in the Great Lakes region, which again is so critical in neighboring states to Ohio, like Pennsylvania, and Michigan and Wisconsin. You can make an

argument that, and he'll be really concentrating on those states and understanding that probably only one needs to flip to give Trump the victory. Vance could be of marginal help there. So, I think it was a pretty good pick actually.

Roskam: It is interesting, I think during the speech, JD Vance mentioned Wisconsin, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Ohio, two, if not three times.

Ellis: [Inaudible]

Roskam: Yeah, I mean that, you know where he is going to be parked for the next couple of months just hammering in those states. And it is interesting to contemplate what a Haley, Nikki Haley would have been like on the ticket or Glenn Youngkin or Marco Rubio. All those things are, it is just parlor talk because nobody will know, and so the only factor we don't know in where this race is who Kamala Harris will choose, assuming that she gets the nod.

Let me ask you, how do, how are you looking at the House races right now? How are you looking at the Senate races right now? And what do you think, if it were to, if these races were to be held today, what would happen?

Ellis: I think the Republicans have a real problem in the Senate races. I don't think those have come around the way they had hoped at this point in time because if you look at the Trump numbers in these states that have heavily contested Senate races, there is a big drop-off almost across the board. Michigan may be the one exception to that where Trump's number and the Senate number are pretty close. The rest of them, there is a pretty good-sized drop anywhere from five points maybe in Ohio to 15 or so in other places, like Montana, although ironically, Montana may be the one they win. So, I think they've got to figure a way to, and the turnout model will help to a degree if Trump in fact carries a lot of these states.

But I think they've got a real issue there to overcome the bridge, or the gap, where Trump is as opposed to where their Republican Senate candidate is and that that needs to improve greatly if they're going to have a big night. I think right now they're at 51. They get the West Virginia seat, that is almost uncontested with Governor Jim Justice picking up that seat for the Republicans as Joe Manchin's retired on the Democratic side, are now independent.

But then we move to Montana. I do think that state comes through for the Republicans. Trump right now is running 18 to 20 points ahead. And Tim Sheehy, the Republican candidate against Senator John Tester, now, he's pulled ahead too, but he is still running about 15 points behind Trump, 12 to 15. But that still may be enough, Peter, for him to go over the top, because Trump's so far ahead and that turnout model is going to be so strongly Republican

I think interestingly in Maryland, Larry Hogan has the same problem that Senator Tester has and that is it is such an adverse turnout model. Biden at the time was up 30 points over Trump in Maryland. You got to assume Harris is going to be up

to a similar degree over Trump there. He, Trump, this is one of Trump's worst states. And how does Hogan overcome that avalanche on a turnout against the Republican ticket, as well as Tester, how does he overcome that turnout against the Democratic ticket in Montana? But beyond that, so those two, West Virginia and Montana, would give the Republicans 51. And then I think, but they need 53 or so to protect themselves against more adverse maps coming in 2026 and 2028. And right now, I don't see them going beyond 51 right now unless we see some real change happening in these Senate races.

Roskam: How about the House races?

Ellis: House races, it is just going to be another heavily incumbent year. I was looking at the financial disclosure reports that the FEC published on their June 30th deadline, and I was amazed on the challenger races, both sides actually, of the huge advantage that the incumbent has. It is more than it, than you typically see for races that are supposed to be competitive. And so therefore, I think we see just another huge incumbent reelection percentage. Last time it was 98.1% of all incumbents who ran for reelection in the House. One, I wouldn't be surprised to see that again and I think the keys are that it, a lot of it comes down to the states of New York and California, the Democrats' best states. But there are seven Republicans sitting in Democratic seats in those states, three in New York and four in California. And how many of those seats can the Republicans hold in a presidential year? And that is the unanswered question. I think we're going to see another very tight House majority, one way or another. And I think those states have a lot to do with it.

Other states that have multiple seats in play, Arizona, Colorado, Iowa, Michigan. So, I think there is a small number of states really that is going to declare, rather determine the outcome of the U.S. House majority, but again, it is five seats right now. It might be about that again in the next Congress. We've got, Republicans will gain three seats, up from the redistricting out of North Carolina, but that is negated to a degree with Democrats picking up one seat in Alabama due to redistricting and another in Louisiana. So, it would be a net one for Republicans so far on redistricting, and then we'll see what happens. But the two big states I'm going to be watching for House majority determination are New York and California.

Roskam: Jim, do you think the Republicans have learned the lesson on early voting and for a few years there, Donald Trump was saying forget it, do same-day voting, ballot integrity, etcetera, etcetera, and that just didn't work out. Democrats have a phenomenal early voting model and a early voting operation. Do you think the GOP is getting its act together to be able to compete on that basis?

Ellis: Yes, Trump certainly has. Trump is certainly singing a different tune about early voting and all of the ways people can vote now. So, he is absolutely suggesting that people vote early. But a lot of that is just really how the two parties vote and the Democrats just topped all over the mail voting and the early voting, and Republicans tend to be a lot of same-day Election Day voters. But I think that is probably going to change, and we'll see I think more and more Republican

members pick up on early voting simply because their campaign structure, if you will, in the national level or the presidential level, is going to be emphasizing that to a greater degree and making it easier to vote in that manner. So yes, I think we'll see better participation at the early times for Republicans in this election.

Roskam: Well, Jim, as always, your insights are terrific. And I really appreciate your taking the time to walk us through these races and the impact of these incredibly changing historic events that are just cascading down upon us.

So stay tuned. Coming up, we're going to have an episode of The Cloakroom with Peter Roskam featuring my conversation with Congressman Brendan Boyle, Democrat from Philadelphia, member of the Ways and Means Committee, and the ranking Democrat on the House Budget Committee, who will bring some just incredible insight into process and policy all the way around. And then Jim, you and I will be talking about the Democratic Convention, after that, we'll be analyzing that and look forward to that very much. So, this is The Cloakroom with Peter Roskam. Thanks for listening.

Rubenking: Thank you, Peter and Jim. If you have any questions for Peter, his full contact information is in the show notes. As always, thanks for listening to BakerHosts and The Cloakroom with Peter Roskam.

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