Podcast Transcript

2026 Midterm Congressional Elections

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Kattman: Welcome to The Cloakroom with Peter Roskam. Former Congressman Peter Roskam leads BakerHostetler's Federal Policy team. On today's podcast, Peter is joined by his BakerHostetler colleague, former Democratic Congressman Heath Schuler, and Jim Ellis, a veteran of federal politics and election forecasting. Jim is the founder of ELLIS Insight, a nonpartisan firm that tracks campaigns and elections. On tap today the 2026 midterm congressional elections. Will Democratics sweep? Will Republicans hang on? Let's find out and listen into The Cloakroom with Peter Roskam.

Roskam: Well, welcome to the Baker podcast. It is great to be in conversation with my colleague, Heath Schuler, former member of Congress with whom I served. And we're going to hear, I'm sure, a little bit of conversation about when we came in together in 2006, because it was a wave year for his party and it is feeling like that again this year. And Jim Ellis of ELLIS Insight, who is a prognosticator, a

pollster, an analyst, and somebody who's seen a lot of races over the years and a lot of different trends. And so, gentlemen, let's just jump right in it.

Heath, let me start with you. You came in and you were a highly recruited candidate in the 2006 cycle. You were meant to fit the profile of your constituency in North Carolina. You were a different kind of Democrat that year. You came in with some like-minded people. How did that feel in '06 as you, you know, coming off of a football career, brand new into politics, how did it feel and could you feel the wave underneath you?

Shuler: Yeah, Peter, you certainly could. I mean, the wave was, you could kind of feel that momentum growing. I mean, we were in the middle of a war, if you'll recall, under President Bush, and that wasn't going well. The poll numbers for the president was really down, very similar to what we're seeing now. And then during that process, Rahm Emanuel was headed up recruiting for the DCCC. He went out and got more middle-of-the-road, more conservative type Democrats that kind of fit the mold. I mean, you had sheriff, you had several former military people. You had a lot of executives in the business world. And if you kind of start looking around, you're starting to see those individuals, whether it be you're talking about Texas or you're talking about Kansas. Those are, you know, two Senate races that you're looking at and said, these aren't the normal Democrats that are running that you would normally run in a situation like that, that is getting a lot of momentum just on the Senate side. And you have that, but maybe not as much as it was in '06, more that middle-of-the-road, because it's always been much more of a challenge now in the primaries to get those middle-of-the-road folks. And Rahm Emanuel did such a great job. He just kind of squished the primaries oftentimes in those races and took no for an answer and just literally, he was like, went all in even on primaries for more moderate, conservative, middle-of-the-road Democrats. And maybe not as much of that as there were in '06, or maybe there is just not as many of us of those that are, you know, probably we've all gone to the independent look and more of a vote for the person, not the party.

Roskam: Jim, you've seen a lot of elections over the years and you've seen different trends. Sometimes there is a big discussion of a wave for one party or another, and we've seen those and some of us have lived through those, and sometimes they underperform. How does this feel to you based on your observations? And we can get into these races here in a couple of minutes, but just give us a top line. How significant of a trend does this feel like to you?

Ellis: Well, it has certainly picked up in the last three weeks. And we've been hearing this blue wave for the last two years, but we always do. And normally it doesn't, it sort of fizzles out. But in this case, I think we've seen some momentum more on the Democratic side, particularly in the last three weeks as we're headed into early voting now. We've got 27 states voting. The numbers are just starting to come out. So I'm starting to look at those just to see how that is faring. And you have to really sort of compare how the party has done versus itself in previous elections, not against the other party. So we'll get some trends there.

But I think Heath is right on the types of Democrats we see. It is different than 2006 because you've got so many that are on the far left really because of the primary situation. And then, you have Texas is James Talarico, who was certainly in the far left of the legislature there. Now he is trying to change all his positions in Texas, but does that sell? I think there is just a lot of conflicts out there this time. I do think the Democrats take the House. I'm not sure they take the Senate. In fact, I would bet on the Republicans to hang on there. And I think the Democratic final number in the House, as we know, 218 is the majority. I think it is going to be between 221 and 227 and not 237 to 240 like some of the Democratic partisans say.

Roskam: All right. So let's talk about some of the themes of this election, and then let's get into some of these races, particularly the Senate races, because they're higher profile, and then we can talk about the House toward the end. It strikes me that this is a referendum on Donald Trump. He wants it to be a referendum on him. And the Democrats are only too happy to make it a referendum on him. And, you know, it does seem like Donald Trump has been focusing a lot of time talking about the ballroom, the Kennedy Center, the arch, some of these things that…

Shuler: People's figures.

Roskam: That, yeah. I mean, right. Yeah, right. Well, how they look. I cannot even imagine his assessment of you, Heath. Let's just leave that there. And yet, you know, a lot of people are really struggling and these conversations about all these other subjects feel obtuse. They want to talk about the cost of living. They want to talk about data centers. They don't see a strategy on the Iran war. They're disquieted about his seemingly sympathy for Vladimir Putin. They're really questioning Elon Musk's influence and all of these other, these, all of these other things…

Schuler: Just the opposite of what got Trump elected when Kamala Harris was talking about all these abstract things. He was…

Ellis: Yep.

Shuler: …staying on affordability of groceries and gas prices. He stayed on that and that was his message and didn't vary off of it. And it is almost like he's forgotten what got him elected and now he is doing all the abstract stuff. When, if you…

Roskam: Right.

Shuler: …look at Democrats, they're just looking at like, let's talk about diesel fuel, talk about your farmers, talking about harvesting your crops and you can't afford it, and groceries and gas prices. And they're back to that. It is almost like both parties just like woke up one day and they decided to switch positions.

Roskam: Right, they switch positions. And I think, Heath, to your point, I think a lot of Republicans in Congress want to be talking about these other themes…

Shuler: Yes.

Roskam: …but they're not able to because the president is such a dominant figure culturally, politically, in the Republican Party, et cetera. And so they find themselves constantly having to answer these questions. There is also kind of a money versus momentum dynamic. Jim, you mentioned the momentum, the momentum growing, not a shift, but growing over the past couple of weeks. And yet the GOP has significant money in in super PACs, I mentioned the Musk contributions and so forth. What do you make of that? It kind of, at the end, you know, money is, money matters, but it can't buy you love as they say.

Ellis: Right. Well, I hope they're putting a lot of that money, and I think the Elon Musk money is doing this, going into grassroots to turn out that vote. This is a turnout election. It is not a persuasion election. And…

Roskam: Explain that a little bit. What do you mean by that?

Ellis: Well, nobody is changing their mind out there. No voters are really, it appears, open to changing their mind. Part of it is what Heath said. I mean, the message is so convoluted now. I don't understand why the Republicans haven't done several things. One, talk about the positive aspects of the Big Beautiful Bill they all voted for, which we don't even hear talk about that anymore. And Alaska is the prime example of that, which the Senate race is close, and it shouldn't be. I mean, all of the Big Beautiful Bill that Dan Sullivan supported and worked for, brought to Alaska, opening up their energy development and their economy. It is going to be a boom for them. But yet, that race is close. They're just not communicating here. I think you guys hit that right on the money.

And the other thing I don't see, and it comes from the conservative media too, not just the candidates, is they let the Democrats get away with this affordability issue that Heath was talking about. And all they have to say is, well, how are you going to change that? And there is no, they don't have an answer to that. But they're not forced to say how they're going to change it. Peter, you and I know how they're going to change it. They're going to spend a lot more money that we don't have and raise taxes, so.

Roskam: Right, and that is not an attractive option. And yet…

Ellis: No.

Roskam: …they're poised. I'm reminded of, you know, in 2010, I was in the House and a bunch of Tea Party Republicans came in. And they came in and they were mistaken about what their, how, why they won the election. They thought people that went out and voted for them. They didn't vote for them. They voted against the incumbency. They voted against Obama's first term, the health care debate, and so forth. And I think that there is a lot of that. And I think, look, the Democrats have figured out this time, that it is very, very, very compelling to say, I'm not with those guys. I'm against that, I'm against the ballroom and all of these other things. And Donald Trump doesn't seem to have the discipline to get out of the way. Okay, let's shift gears. Let's talk about…

Shuler: Can I ask you a question, Peter?

Roskam: Yes, sir.

Shuler: I mean, don't you think that, I mean, there's always been a little bit of referendum against the other party. But how often have you heard someone talking in politics in the last 15 years that says, I am voting for this person because of why. It is more about, unless they're like entrenched into the party type people, right? I'm talking about kind of the everyday, the 80% of American people are, you hardly ever hear them say, I'm voting for this individual because why. It is like, well I'm, you hear so often, I'm voting against this other person.

Roskam: I think that is right, Heath. And I think the last person that captured that was Obama's 2008 campaign. There was a winsomeness to it. There was a brightness to it. You know what I mean?

Shuler: Yep.

Roskam: It was very aspirational. But I think that is the last time that you heard those sorts of themes. And that explained, I think, a big part of his election and the success of it. But to take your point, some of these have become real knife fights and both sides have figured out they're not going to vote for me, but I can make it so the other person is completely toxic and they're going to vote against them.

All right. Let's look at some of these campaigns and let's go from east to west. Let's start up in Maine, and that's been a super tumultuous race with Graham Plattner in, then out as the Democratic nominee, and now replaced by Troy Jackson. It seems to me, Jim, that the smart money says, I'm never going to bet against Susan Collins. And the fact is, she does seem like she is probably going to pull this off. How does it feel to you?

Ellis: Yeah, I think so, too. And I'm on both parties' text trains now.

Shuler: Of course you are.

Ellis: And last, Heath, the last three days I've gotten several Troy Jackson and Democrat texts saying, Troy is behind by three to Susan Collins, we have to get more…

Shuler: Yep. Yeah.

Ellis: …money to him. Susan Collins in 2020, her opponent spent a total of $62 million against her in a state of 1.3 million people, 900,000 registered voters. So think about that, the math there. She was never ahead in a poll in the general election, not one, and they polled that all the time. Yet, she won by eight and a half points.

Shuler: Yeah.

Ellis: And I think her opponent last time was stronger than what she's got this time. And so, and he's made some mistakes recently, telling her to shut up in a debate and…

Roskam: Yeah, not charming.

Ellis: …that is quite a damper with women. And that is coming out. So I think she's got the momentum to going in on this particular one. So I would not bet against Susan Collins there.

Roskam: What do you think then, let's go just down a little bit to New Hampshire. It seemed like today if, it seemed like Sununu was surging, but that is kind of slipping away a little bit. Am I over-interpreting things?

Ellis: No, not at all. It is the home heating oil issue, I think. You have home heating oil now that people are starting to buy. It is over $6 a gallon. I mean, this is where Trump is indefensible, really, because he promised all these prices would come down and they haven't. In fact, they've gone up. And I lived in New Hampshire for a couple of years, and a lot of people still use the home heating oil to heat their homes. And when you have a tank of 250 to 500 gallons and you have to fill that more than once during the winter, and it is now $6 a gallon, I mean, you're talking real money just to heat your home. And that is going to be felt. And I think that is going to be hard for John E. Sununu to overcome.

On the other hand, in the governor's race, Kelly Ayotte, the former Republican senator, she was elected governor two years ago. New Hampshire and Vermont still have two-year terms for governor. She is way ahead. She is ahead double digits in the same polls that show John E. Sununu trailing Congressman Chris Pappas. So it is an interesting dynamic in New Hampshire.

Roskam: She is kind of a superstar, isn't she? I mean, just, sort of unusually gifted and talented. I mean, she lost to Senate reelect.

Ellis: She lost the last…

Roskam: But yeah, okay.

Ellis: She lost the Senate seat. But clearly she's done something different as in the governor's races because she won…

Roskam: Yeah.

Ellis: …that one going away. And in a bad climate for Republicans, in a state that is not friendly to Republicans, she is doing extremely well. So she's obviously done well as governor.

Roskam: So Heath, let's go to the Tar Heel state. Let's go to North Carolina. Democrat pick up, like game set match, is this race pretty well done, where Roy Cooper is going to the Senate and Mike Whatley is…

Shuler: Yes. Yeah, I mean…

Roskam: …watching from the sidelines.

Shuler: Cooper has won twice as attorney general, twice as governor. There is just, unless something really crazy happens and I don't see that happening. I mean, Cooper wins going away double digits.

Roskam: Yeah.

Shuler: Yeah. I mean, even to the point that…

Roskam: What about South ….

Shuler: A lot of people with, in North Carolina that Trump's coming soon and they're like, I hope he doesn't call me to be on stage. I don't want to be there. I'm in tough races. I mean, I've talked to a lot of the people in other states too and it is just like, if he comes to their state, how do they handle that situation? They don't want to be, I mean, I'm talking about folks at one state in particular, the guy won by, Congressman won by 27 points. It is like, he said, I'm single digits. He said, I'm having to work every single minute of the day to where I can get back in office. And I never thought he would ever have to do that. And it is just kind of odd how so much of it has changed. And it is like, they can't publicly say that they need to get away from Trump because of their base, but they are getting a little bit, they don't know how to handle a situation if he comes of their state and he asks them to be on stage with them.

Roskam: That is a great point. Can you pick up on that, Jim? What Heath just articulated…

Ellis: Yeah.

Roskam: …some of these members who they've been winning 58, 59 percent of the vote in the past several cycles and they feel like, hey, I got this thing down. And they may not have really developed much of a general election political operation, and now, all of a sudden, they find themselves in a completely different environment. What do you think? And do you think there is going to be some members that are going to be waking up on Election Day on the Republican side surprised at what's happened to them?

Ellis: Well, maybe so. Although I'm not sure anybody would be surprised at this point because they're all polling their own districts. So I get this question all the time about upsets. I'm not sure there is any more that we don't know about that could come into play. But I think the point that Heath made is a good one. If he comes to North Carolina, you've got two real tight congressional races there at least. And that is a real issue, I think, for some of these folks. So…

Shuler: I went through that with Obama. I went through that with Obama, and I did not…

Roskam: Yeah.

Shuler: …want Obama to come to my race, you know, to my district during that midterm election when all the Democrats…

Roskam: Right.

Shuler: …lost and the Republicans won it back. I was like nuhuh, don't come around me, I can't, I'm not doing that.

Roskam: Right.

Shuler: Yeah.

Roskam: Right. That makes perfect sense.

Shuler: The question…

Roskam: Okay, let's…

Shuler: I was, at least I was willing to tell them that. No, I don't need you in my district.

Ellis: Yeah.

Rokam: Right.

Shuler: Well, Greg Abbott, you know, in Texas did that. He did not attend.

Ellis: He did. That is exactly right. He did.

Roskam: Yeah.

Shuler: Yeah.

Roskam: What about South Carolina? Darlene Graham, is she going to win that? Is the set point for the GOP just so strong in South Carolina that she is going to pull this off or is Annie Andrews going to pull an inside straight here?

Shuler: I'll let Jim answer that one. I've got a theory, but…

Ellis: The Trafalgar Group just came back with a poll yesterday, had Darlene Graham up by three points. I think that is going to continue. Alan Wilson, the Attorney General, Congressman Joe Wilson's son, he is going to run, easily win the governor's race.

Shuler: Yes.

Ellis: I think that turnout model will help pull Darlene Graham across the finish line. And that is what it is going to take, but I think they'll be able to do it. It'll be closer than it should be because she is not a very good candidate. And that wasn't really the original plan. It was Trump that then wanted her to run for the full term. Governor McMaster there appointed her as the caretaker and then would have

an open race for the Senate after Lindsey Graham unfortunately and unexpectedly passed away. So…

Shuler: There was a lot of other…

Ellis: …it made sense…

Shuler: …members that were, had been in politics for a very long time in South Carolina that were like, well, hold on, time out. We've had our, we've paid our dues. We've done through the process.

Ellis: Right.

Shuler: We want to be the ones to actually run this race. And so I think the part of the problem is, is because of being anointed by Trump, then what ultimately has happened now, there is not the political machine quote behind on that particular race. They're looking at other races and there is not a machine behind even really strong supporters of Lindsey Graham are not behind her. And so, but probably the way you're, that Jim you're talking, that they're going to go vote for her, but she doesn't have that supporting cast that all the other candidates…

Ellis: No.

Shuler: …in the Republican Party have in South Carolina.

Ellis: No, that is true.

Roskam: It reminds me of somebody like making an internal leadership race in the House and not having a whip operation. I mean…

Ellis: Yes, that is right.

Roskam: …you need your people out there hustling and gathering those votes and it just doesn't happen because you put your name on the ballot.

Shuler: Right.

Roskam: Okay, let's go down to Georgia. John Ossoff is going to run, win this, just running away and..

Schuler: Yes.

Roskam: …that is a very secure seat. Then let's…

Schuler: And then it'll happen in the presidential race, it looks like.

Roskam: Right, he says he won't, but…

Schuler: Oh, he is in.

Roskam: …but that'll…

Schuler: He is already running for president.

Ellis: Yeah, I think so.

Roskam: He is in, okay. And so Ohio, I don't know if you saw, there was a Vivek Ramaswamy ad that was, by all accounts, not very well placed, and it has his opponent's mother saying his opponent is a liar and it turns out it is like a disastrous story. You can Google it, and it is just not going to help any Republican in Ohio right now. That is for sure. Where do you think this thing lands, Jim, between John Husted and Sherrod Brown? Both Senate veterans…

Ellis: Right.

Roskam: …Sherrod Brown, great retail politician, et cetera. What is your sense of where this is going to come down? Or is it a total jump ball right now?

Ellis: Well, I think it is a jump ball. There is just a few things that is interesting, though. The progression in this race on the polling for Brown is exactly where it was at this point two years ago where he was ahead by a little bit. And then remember, he ended up losing by three and a half points. And I think the really interesting thing on this is that when Sherrod Brown lost in 2024, and he had been an elected-officer almost consecutively since 1972 when you have his time in the legislature, then he was a two-term secretary of state, nine terms in the House and three terms in the Senate.

Roskam: Right.

Ellis: And in 2024, he gets 293,000 more votes than he did when he lost in 2018. And he still lost by three and a half points. And I think that tells you how far right Ohio is moving. Now, I agree with you, Peter. I think this governor's race could affect the turnout differently.

Roskam: Yeah.

Ellis: This is a different race. But the Republicans tend to under poll in these states that…

Roskam: Interesting.

Ellis: …if the pollsters get the Democrat…

Roskam: That is fair.

Ellis: …number right. And we talk about this wave, but in almost every election, the candidates are even. So it is not like the Republicans are getting blown out.

Shuler: Yes. The question is, we always talk about being in politics is who is going to get out the vote? I mean…

Roskam: Right.

Ellis: Yeah.

Shuler: …who is going to vote? I mean, there is a lot of people that get polled, and even if you're, been consistent over the last 8, 10 years, it may not be the same people that is going to the polls that they were 8 to 10 years ago. Or in the last 8 to 10 years.

Ellis: That is true. I mean, especially in states where you see…

Roskam: No, let's…

Ellis: …large populations…

Roskam: let's take a look at…

Ellis: …move in. Like North Carolina…

Roskam: Yes.

Ellis: …and South Carolina.

Shuler: North Carolina is a, South Carolina is a perfect…

Roskam: Yeah.

Shuler: …I mean, the county that I live in in Knoxville, Tennessee, I mean, the school board went Democrat and I mean, it hadn't been moved Democrat until like, I mean, 60 something years or something crazy.

Ellis: Wow.

Roskam: Wow. Let's talk, you want to talk crazy, as they say, let's talk crazy.

Ellis: Yeah, let's do it.

Roskam: Let's talk about the Senate. Let's talk about the Senate race in Michigan.

Ellis: Yes.

Roskam: So from Michigan political operators that I've been in touch with, they think Mike Rogers is going to pull this off. Now, what do you guys think?

Shuler: I think so too.

Roskam: So what I'm hearing is that the Democratic nominee, Abdul El-Sayed, is having a very tough time closing with African-American voters and having a really tough time closing with Jewish voters. And that, as was described to me in a text exchange, there is not a single Republican vote for El-Sayed in the entire state of

Michigan. What do you think? I mean, is a Michigan Senate Republican win, is it like the great white whale that people just chase every few decades? And what do you think?

Ellis: Well, I tell you, I think this is the point race in the whole Senate for the majority. I've been saying this in all the presentations I give, the first race I'm looking at on election night is the Michigan Senate race. If Mike Rogers, and I believe both of you served with him.

Roskam: Yeah.

Ellis: Heath, you served with him, right? Yeah.

Shuler: Yes.

Ellis: And I think he may be the best candidate the Republicans have in the nation, and he is in the right place. And if he wins, I think the Republicans can hang on to the Senate. If he doesn't, the door is open for the Democrats to win. But there is a couple of points on El-Sayed. First of all, going into the August 4 primary on the Democratic side, there were nine polls taken headed into that election, published. And he was ahead by an average of 16 percentage points over Congresswoman Haley Stevens, and he won by one.

Roskam: Right.

Ellis: So that is a huge over poll there. Two is that, if that is the case in the general, and the Republicans tend to under poll, remember, nobody gave Rogers much of a chance in 2024 in the Senate race. But he only lost by three-tenths of 1%. And there was an under poll for him there. El-Sayed is running up about one to three points. The latest one I saw had Rogers up two. And I just think you have those types of dynamics there that again, I think happens. And the other thing about the primary, Peter, as you alluded to in Wayne County there, Detroit, he lost that county to Haley Stevens. And that shows you he is weak with the black vote. And if that is the case, I think Rogers wins.

Roskam: Yeah, it is interesting. Both Heath and I served with Mike Rogers. And in my experience, he is an incredibly disciplined candidate. He would always, he had close races in the House when he was in Congress.

Shuler: Yes.

Roskam: He was what I would describe as a non-scary conservative who could articulate a conservative worldview and elicit a level of connectivity with an audience and not be off-putting and sort of invitational in how he was doing it. So I think his skill, along with another candidate we'll talk about in a minute in Iowa, Ashley Henson, I think they're two of the best candidates who are out there today.

Okay, let's look at Minnesota real quick. I don't think Michelle Tafoya is likely to win. But the fact that she is competitive in Minnesota is a real interesting dynamic. I think kind of all the way around, and I'm sure she covered Heath

during his time in the NFL. And she is a well-known figure and well thought of. And she's taken that corruption scandal up in Minnesota and I think really worked it well. I heard one analyst say that both Michelle Tafoya and the Democrat Lieutenant Governor, Peggy Flanagan, have troublesome men in their lives. One has Donald Trump and the other has Tim Walz that they've got to sort of deal with. And I thought that was pretty, that is not my original thing…

Ellis: That is a great line.

Roskam: …but it is like, yeah, they're dealing with it. So is that, do you think my analysis is on, Jim, just in terms of the fact that it is competitive is interesting?

Ellis: Yeah. I think she's got a chance to pull that out and that if there is an upset, that'd be the night. I've always thought this was a sleeper race for the Republicans because, again, she is very well known. Obviously, we know her from national sports, but she built her sports broadcasting career in Minnesota sports. And so she is a very well-known there and obviously very, very well with the media. She does a great job, obviously, because that was her whole career. And I think the fact that she has really focused on that government corruption issue, and there's been so much unrest in Minnesota over the past few years with the George Floyd tragedy, you had the ICE situation, you had the riots, and then this government fraud issue, which is huge. Now, interestingly, here is a clue that the Democrats are concerned in Minnesota. So last week, Governor Walz said, after originally saying that there was no scandal, and now he is saying it was all his fault, that he…

Roskam: Oh, nice.

Ellis: …is the governor and he is responsible for it and he's taken steps for it. And then he says, don't blame any of the other people on the ballot for this. This is me.

Roskam: Nice, got it.

Ellis: I think that tells us a lot as to where they're going. Because if you look statewide, all the Democrats are under polling where they normally are. Amy Klobuchar, the senator running for governor. Last number, she is at 48 to 50. Her average, she's won the Senate seat four times and her average vote was 60%.

Roskam: Wow.

Ellis: She is at 48 to 50 in the polling right now. They're all polling down. And so, and a poll I saw last week, most important issue in Minnesota was government corruption. We don't see that…

Roskam: Interesting.

Ellis: …anywhere else.

Roskam: Interesting.

Ellis: That tells us, I think, Tafoya's campaign message is getting through. Outside shot that she wins.

Roskam: Okay, let's then just shift south to one of, I think, one of the best Republican candidates out there, Ashley Hinson, Congresswoman from Iowa, running to succeed Joni Ernst. But she is in the fight of her life against Josh Turek. It is like no joke. And obviously five months ago, nobody thought that the Senate political operations or anybody was going to have to spend tens of millions of dollars. And there is a dynamic that is called Iowa nice. You know what I mean? Where you're…

Ellis: Yeah.

Roskam: …just kind of nice and charming and yet boom they're taking some headshots at each other politically pretty aggressively. It seems to me that what is more likely true than not true is that Hinson pulls this thing off and it stays in the GOP column. Jim, what do you think?

Ellis: I agree. She is starting to poll up at the same time the Republican candidate for governor is losing. That is a good sign for her. The Midwest, we got Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas, they all poll the same. They're tight up until right about now, and then the Republican takes off and wins comfortably. We've seen that pattern over and over and over in those states. And Hinson, I agree with you, Peter, she is a great candidate. And I looked back at Joni Ernst's two victories. Ashley Hinson today is in better position than Ernst was in both of her victories. So and that is why I think she pulls it off. And Pete Ricketts survives in Nebraska, and I think Roger Marshall survives in Kansas.

Roskam: All right. So let's go back down to, let's talk about these last two races that are so interesting and so competitive. One is Texas and the other is Alaska. So Texas, there is so much activity and there is so much, a lot of Republicans are just scratching their heads saying, hey, if Cornyn was the nominee, this'd be…

Ellis: Right.

Roskam: …it wouldn't even be competitive. And so the idea of spending 200 plus, plus, plus millions of dollars is just crazy. But Paxton is obviously a really flawed candidate for all the obvious reasons. And this is a race where, you know, James Talarico is able to say, I'm not Ken Paxton. And Paxton is trying desperately to shift the attention to say, oh well, Talarico, let's tell us who you are. What do you guys think? Heath, you've been, this is kind of your part of the country as it were. Where do you think these Texas voters are going?

Shuler: Well, I just think that Trump picked the wrong candidate. I mean, Paxton was not the better of the two candidates, and obviously being ousted by his own party in Texas, I mean, there is a lot of people that they want Texas to remain red, but I think Talarico pulls this off. I think he takes a little bit, he's got much more of a calmer demeanor in how he communicates. And whether he had voted a particular way in the state legislature, I think he's kind of changed his dynamics

and his messaging to, people are starting to think, wow, this guy, at least he is willing to listen. He is wanting to have a conversation, he'll engaged, and he wants to do all the right things. That is the message that a lot of people, actually, several friends of mine in Texas are kind of more of the independent type, but probably have voted Republican. And they're like, man, I want to give this guy a chance, I already know what I have with Paxton. We've seen that movie before and don't want to go down that path. And I think you're getting people willing to take a chance on Tallarico and they're not willing to take a chance on Paxton.

Roskam: So I've been in touch and Jim, I want to…

Ellis: Yeah, recently…

Roskam: …come to you. I've been in touch with some folks in Texas who are not Paxton fans. They were, these are Cornyn people, but they think Paxton is going to pull it off, and I've checked with them episodically. I guess my question is, there are a number of Republicans that are just going to stay home and not vote in this race and just say, listen, I'm not for Talarico, but this guy Paxton is just too much, I can't do it. How does that, where do you put that, Jim, in terms of your calculus?

Ellis: I think that is a big problem on the Republican side. The turnout is one thing, but these are people maybe at the polling place voting and they just skip that Senate race. And I…

Roskam: Yeah, they're voting for Abbott and they're not going to vote for Paxton.

Shuler: Yeah.

Ellis: Yeah. Because, and I mean, the guy is totally flawed. I mean, they probably picked the worst possible candidate they could find in the whole state. But one of the activists down there told me recently, they said, well, but Paxton is our Bill Clinton. There is all these scandals on him, but he still wins. He's won three times statewide. He won this difficult primary against Senator Cornyn. It kind of defies logic that the guy can survive all of the things he survived. Remember the same…

Roskam: It seems like…

Ellis: …House of Representatives re-impeached him by over a two to one vote and it was all his own party doing it.

Roskam: I know. He seems like he doesn't have Clinton's personality gift.

Ellis: No.

Roskam: Let's put it that way.

Ellis: Clearly not.

Roskam: The high beams of charm I'm not seeing. All right. Let's shift before we talk about some of these other bigger themes. Let's go to Alaska. Dan Sullivan in the fight of his life…

Ellis: Yeah.

Roskam: …against former Congresswoman Mary Peltola. I think he's got three things going against him, and let's just unpack those quickly. One is there is another Dan Sullivan on the ballot, which is no joke. I mean, how many Heath Schulers could you have on the ballot and survive? I don't think…

Shuler: Yeah, that is tough.

Roskam: …I don't think more than one. Ranked-choice voting, Republicans hate it. It is complicated and it doesn't, this never ends well for Republican candidates by and large. And then Peltola is an authentic Alaska-first candidate. I mean this is, there is something…

Shuler: That is Native American that is probably one of the big things for her.

Roskam: Yeah. I mean, that is…

Shuler: I mean it is a huge advantage for her in Native American vote.

Ellis: Right.

Roskam: That strikes me as very powerful. Where do you guys think this lands?

Ellis: Yeah. This one is a tough one that shouldn't be tough. And I wasn't paying all that much attention to the early polling that showed her ahead because that again is something that happens in Alaska where the Democrats do better polling. But then the jungle primary came.

Roskam: Right.

Ellis: And you've got, they have a crazy system up there where four people advance to the primary. And so, what happened, and everybody is on the same ballot. So it is really a test for the general election. And Sullivan came in eight percentage points behind Peltola.

Roskam: Yeah.

Ellis: And the bigger problem is, in Alaska, they report their votes by statehouse district, not county.

Roskam: Right.

Ellis: And there are 40 statehouse districts. And the Republicans should win 25 of those. But of those 25, Sullivan only came in ahead of her in 13 of the 25 Republican districts. So that is a huge warning sign. And I mean, his numbers

look better now, but boy, I don't know. It is going to be tough. Now, the ranked-choice voting, to give you an idea how crazy that system is, the second Dan Sullivan only got 2% of the vote, and he came in third. And the 4th place finisher got 1%. And both of them are advancing to the general election. The ranked-choice may not be as bad this time, and that only takes effect if nobody gets 50%. But if people are truly confused of the two Dan Sullivans, and the courts made the second Dan Sullivan run as Daniel J. Sullivan Jr. versus Dan Sullivan, Senator. And it is his legal name. So it is not that they could, the Republicans tried to get him kicked off the ballot. And the court, well, it is his legal name. He has a right to run for office.

Roskam: Right.

Ellis: And so, but I would think if someone is truly confused as to who is who, the ranked-choice actually might work in Sullivan's favor, because chances are they would rank them one or two. And if it got to them, then they would, the Dan Sullivan eventually would get that vote. So I'm not sure how big of a factor it is. But he is in trouble.

Roskam: It seems to me like there is a pretty sophisticated Alaskan electorate because if you think about Lisa Murkowski was able to put together a write-in campaign and…

Shuler: Yes.

Ellis: Yeah, that is true.

Roskam: …people could figure out how to spell her name and the whole thing. All right. So let's quickly make a prediction and then I want to just finish up by talking about some trends. I'll go first. So I think the Republicans are going to narrowly keep the Senate and I think the House is gone, that Jeffries becomes the next Speaker and he's got between 225 and 230 Democrats. So Senate, GOP, and House, Dem, with a decent margin for them to deal with. Heath, what do you think?

Shuler: I just know that the next two years is going to be about as miserable as the last two years have been. But the only one thing, I'm always a big proponent of having a divided Congress and/or Congress versus the White House. The only negative to that is just the amount of talking that is going to go back and no doing. I don't foresee a recipe in any way that this is drawn up, that there is a recipe for working together to advance the progress of this country. I don't see it at all, which is an unfortunate thing. But I would, Peter, I agree with you. I think it is a narrow margin in the Senate. And it may be just the Vice President being that narrow margin, but it is going to be a very narrow margin. And I think the House will win, I think they may get that 30 vote, 230 votes in the House. Just because I've, so many of my friends that are there now that are just, I don't know if they're hitting the panic button, the…

Roskam: Oh, yeah.

Shuler: …my Republican friends. And which is a good thing, you want to kind of hit the panic button and go out there and work and work and work. Because those are some really great members that we need back in the Congress that are really good people.

Roskam: Jim, what do you think?

Ellis: I agree with you both. I think that is where we are. Democrats in the House, yeah, Peter, I think you're right in that range, 225, 230, I think. But maybe it is a little bit less than that. And then the Senate, the Republicans hang on because Rogers wins, Cooper wins, and then see the Democrats still need four…

Roskam: Yeah.

Ellis: …Republican seats and you're really down to five real races there. So they would have to go four out of five. I think that is going to be really hard for them.

Roskam: Let me make a couple of other points just in closing. The other X factor here, let's assume the Senate gets ridiculously close. John Fetterman is…

Ellis: Yeah.

Roskam: …the senator from Pennsylvania and Democrats have made it pretty clear they're not going to nominate him again. And he's made it clear, he is not going to become a Republican and yet he could caucus with the Republicans. We saw that with, was it Jeffords back from Vermont years ago…

Ellis: Yes.

Roskam: …who started George W. Bush and that whole dynamic can change and shift, which is an interesting dynamic. Something for people to…

Ellis: He could win as an independent when he runs again, he could win as an independent…

Roskam: Listen, right. Right.

Ellis: …and _____ could win.

Shuler: If I'm him, I'm going to be the independent. I'm going to be the guy in the middle that all roads must…

Roskam: Right.

Shuler: …move through Fetterman to get through the Senate.

Roskam: Right, right. Be Joe Manchin, be…

Ellis: Yes.

Roskam: …Kyrsten Sinema, play that role. That…

Shuler: For sure.

Roskam: That is a good life.

Ellis: If they get to 51, and I don't see any way they get to 52, the Democrats. So if they…

Roskam: Right.

Ellis: …get to 51, they have to rely on Fetterman here. And as Trump would say, they haven't been very nice to him, so.

Roskam: They haven't been very nice. So here is a couple of other things to...

Shuler: The Democrats are no longer the party of the big tent. They've narrowed that tent pretty, it is a single file line. And that is part of the problem. Republicans did that, it hurt them in past elections.

Ellis: Yeah.

Roskam: Yeah.

Shuler: Now Democrats have not looked at it and said, you know, now you've got 80% of the people that are outside the tent and they get to pick and choose gladly in those general elections. So Fetterman goes…

Roskam: Well, let me build on that.

Shuler: He is still going to win Pennsylvania.

Roskam: Let me build on that, because Heath, I think you make an excellent point. One of the things that Hakeem Jeffries, he'll be the next Speaker in all likelihood, one of the things that we haven't seen is how he manages the relationship with Donald Trump. On the one hand, he is going to have a huge demand of his base to impeach, to investigate, to do oversight, and really bring their game. And I mean, a ferocious appetite. And at the same time, he is going to have to sit down and negotiate with Donald Trump. The other factor is which Donald Trump shows up. Do you remember when Donald Trump in his first term came kind of close to making a deal on gun control…

Shuler: Yeah.

Roskam: …with Chuck Schumer. And it was Senate Republicans that got him off that. But philosophically, Donald Trump, and I'm being generous here, has not shown a lot of restraining influences on his political worldview. And so he could basically say, look, I'll make a deal with you guys on expanding Medicare or any of these other things.

The other thing to keep an eye on is, and this is particularly true for presumably the next Speaker, Hakeem Jeffries, that the DSA, the socialists within his caucus are basically taking the playbook from the freedom caucus from the past couple of years. Like, hey, we know how to drive an agenda with a narrow group of people of a few dozen folks and we can really, we can drive things. And I think that they're going to be far more aggressive. And one other thing is the administration is going to raise to an art form, political stonewalling, you know what I mean? In terms of the oversights and the subpoenas, and they're going to lawyer up and so forth.

Shuler: Oh, yeah.

Roskam: Where is all of that pressure going to go? It is going to go to the private sector, where you're going to have a lot of companies that are out there that are going to find themselves under investigation, getting letters from Congress.

Shuler: Yeah.

Roskam: And they're not going to have the laminated hall pass that comes from an administration that says, hey, we're a co-equal branch of government, go jump in the lake. These companies, hey, you're a co-equal of nothing. You're going to come before us. And if you don't, we're going to rough you up reputationally, et cetera. So I think that the forces are moving and who gets victimized, in air quotes, but who feels the pressure from this is really an open question. And then, just quickly, on the 2028 nomination process…

Shuler: There you go, yeah.

Roskam: …for the Democrats, there is not really a restraining influence.

Shuler: No.

Roskam: Because in my estimation, you look back when Joe Biden became the nominee, you had senior members of the Democratic Party weighing in, and they basically told Senator Klobuchar and Pete Buttigieg, you're out, because if you stay in Bernie Sanders wins the election. Sanders can't beat Trump. You're out, we're going to nominate Biden. And they agreed and they walked back and they walked away. And then Biden became the nominee. And strategically that was successful. This time around, based on the energy where the progressives are, they're not going to be backing off. They're going to say, hey, get out…

Ellis: No, they won't.

Roskam: …not only are we not backing off, you get out of the way. We're going to tell you which way this is going, which means it is open field running in 2028. And that is not even to talk about the GOP side.

Shuler: Well, that is the biggest fear that I have. And you guys know what a big, you know, my former Housemate, Marco Rubio, I think the world of Marco Rubio, I think he does a phenomenal job. My biggest fear is Marco leaves his position at

some point in time in ‘27 to run for president, which would be a good thing. But what void does that leave within the administration that he is kind of helping run everything that seems to be going in the right direction, and well, other things that, it is all over the map. And that is my biggest fear that happens, that Marco, and I want him to run for president. I think he’d be a wonderful president, but I think it is a real, what void does that leave within this administration? Because is the next person for secretary of state like the last person that is the press secretary for the president? I don’t know the answer to that, but, the history shows…

Roskam: Right.

Shuler: …that he’s not made good choices.

Roskam: Jim, give us…

Ellis: I have a wild…

Roskam: …a last word.

Ellis: I’ve got a wild prediction on the Republican…

Roskam: Yeah.

Ellis: …on the presidential race. I don’t think Rubio runs against Vance. They’re apparently close, and he says he is not going to do that. But this is what I think happens. He does run for vice president, but they will allow him to continue to be Secretary of State, even if he is vice president, which they could do. And…

Roskam: Interesting.

Ellis: …that solves the whole problem, because you would really want Rubio on that ticket. But you don’t, Heath is right, you don’t want him leaving what he’s got. And that is the perfect job for him, what he is doing right now. So, but there isn’t any reason he couldn’t continue being Secretary of State, even if he were vice president.

Roskam: Well, my prediction is we’re going to, this thing is going to twist and turn and bump and roll. And if our predictions today are correct, then great, we’re geniuses. And if not, I hope everybody forgets entirely what we said. And I want to say thank you to Heath Schuler and to Jim Ellis for joining us. And it is always a great conversation. And if you want to listen to this and other conversations like it that give you insight, please sign up and follow The Cloakroom with Peter Roskam.

Kattman: Thank you, Peter, Heath, 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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