

2017 Annual Meat Conference Questions and Answers – Political Update Ron Elving, National Public Radio

If you were a betting man, who would you bet the Democratic nominee for president will be in 2020?

It has become increasingly difficult to discern the next nominee of either party. I probably would not have thought John Kerry would get it in 2004, and everyone thought it would be Hillary in 2008. Needless to say, Trump was a great surprise in 2016. Nonetheless, we do try to figure this one out because the perception of being on the short list can *in itself*, confer an illusion of power in Washington. Democrats' short list in rough order of plausibility is Elizabeth Warren, Mark Warner, Cory Booker, Andrew Cuomo. We might start talking about Amy Klobuchar and/or Kirsten Gillibrand, senators from Minnesota and NY. But there is also the prospect of someone we have not yet heard anything about winning a governor's race or Senate seat in 2018 and catching fire. And by the way, I do not see a clear favorite among these Dem prospects, nor a formidable challenger to a popular incumbent on the ballot in 2020 (if we have one). If Trump is not the nominee, or is a badly wounded nominee, the odds change substantially.

What do you think the dynamics and outcome of the 2018 Senate races will be, and how might that impact Trump's ability to implement his policies?

The Senate races in 2018 are dominated by the lopsided vulnerabilities of the respective parties. GOP has only nine seats on the ballot, only a few of which look vulnerable. The Dems must defend a stunning 25 seats, eight of which are in states Trump won. This means the R's have an almost mortal lock on the majority through 2020. And it means Trump and R's can pressure at least half a dozen or more Dems (Manchin, Heitkamp, Tester, Nelson etc) to vote with them on big ones, possibly giving McConnell 60 votes when he really needs them on Gorsuch or another nominee (it won't come to that on Gorsuch). But there are a few R's who are concerned about their own 2018 future (Dean Heller of Nevada for example) that you will also see some independence on that side of the aisle on issues such as health care, Medicaid, immigration and the like. Trump can threaten recalcitrant R's with a primary challenger, but it's not a game he's played much before and it's trickier than it looks.

How do you think midterms elections will turn out?

Best bet now may be relatively little change in either chamber. Dems could lose a few in the Senate (see above) giving Mitch an easier time in 2019. Dems should actually gain a few in the House because the majority there will probably push the envelope pretty hard and motivate some people who don't normally vote to turn out. If the health care situation deteriorates badly or something else makes the GOP less popular in 2018, that would tend to minimize Dem losses in the Senate and pump up their gains in the House. But even a very good day for Dems in 2018 would be unlikely to provide the 20+ seats net they would need to get back in the majority. They will almost certainly need the larger turnout of a presidential year in 2020 to do that, and even then may need a newly redrawn set of district maps (after the 2020 census) to give them a more level playing field than they have right now. Unless something goes seriously awry for Trump and the R majorities, the House should be safe for the GOP for the next several cycles and quite possibly beyond.

Do you have thoughts on how the Democratic Party will regroup after such major losses at both the federal and states levels?

The worst part of their losses is at the base of the pyramid. They have almost ceased to exist in large parts of the country at the local level, and they are weaker in the state capitals than they have been since before the New Deal. So they need to rebuild from the ground up, and they need to find a new generation of candidates with fresher ideas and a post-internet, post-Twitter approach. But in the meantime they could get a bounceback win here and there depending on how smoothly things go for Team Trump. Reagan's early years included a bad midterm in 1982 (big losses in House but zero in Senate). His second term, he lost the Senate majority in the midterm. Since then we have seen the last three eight-year presidents all enjoy control of House and Senate for a time and then lose control of both. It could happen to Trump, but I wouldn't bet on it. The Dems need to be patient and they need to be busy getting their house in order for the future. And this would have been true even if Hillary had been elected.

Can you speak to the swing to Republican control of so many state governorships and legislatures?

The GOP has been better organized at the state and local level for two decades now and if the Trump years do not damage this it should stand the R's in good stead for a while longer. The GOP has risen in the states largely by opposing the perceived hegemony and heavy-handedness of Washington. This was true in the Clinton years and was even more pronounced in the Obama era. Even when George W. Bush was president the state GOP's were typically running against Washington and doing it effectively. The Dems have come to "own" problems from health care co-pays and high insurance premiums to crumbling infrastructure and even income inequality. And as it appeared increasingly likely that the demographics would keep Dems in the White House, much of the conservative energy and funding has gone into winning at all other levels -- especially governors and state legislators. The GOP has also benefited from increased activism by social conservatives at these levels.

Remind us why Dodd Frank was passed and why it being repealed is important.

It was passed because of popular anger over the federal bailouts of 2008-09. That anger focused on the investment houses and mortgage bankers that were bailed out after profiting from the housing bubble and crashing when that bubble burst, including secondary underwriters and other firms such as AIG. The law as it stood in 2009 did not facilitate prosecuting those who had profited, even if they misrepresented the degree of risk in the mortgage-backed securities they sold or resold. Nor did it facilitate prosecuting profligate mortgage outfits that wrote mortgages for those who couldn't afford the real estate being bought. The failure to prosecute people built pressure for new laws that would be both preventive and punitive, with the attendant risk of denying credit and capital to the deserving as well as the irresponsible. Much of the law has never been fully implemented because of long lead times and lengthy regulation-writing and comment periods. Repealing it has been a longtime promise of the GOP, dating back to its passage, as a symbol of regulatory overreach and Democratic hostility to business. Anticipation of repeal has been a major factor in helping bank stocks lead the Wall Street rally since November. The general expectation is that repeal will allow credit to flow more freely and that elements of the economy starved for capital will finally participate more fully in the recovery. We shall see.

Do you see any parallels between the rise of Trump and the rise of the Third Reich in terms of the socio economic environment that allowed each to rise to power?

I am generally resistant to using fascism (Nazism) or communism as terms or metaphors in American politics. Our traditions are different, and we have generally not been a nation responsive to "ism" of any kind. (I am aware of the many other commentators who have no such qualms, but remain unpersuaded to join them.) It is true that populism, whether of the left or the right, is a growing force in Europe and elsewhere. Much of this is based on the tendency of some voters to feel disenfranchised by large economic changes and disoriented by social change. These voters are attracted to someone with seemingly simple answers (build a wall, tear up the trade deals) and a devotion to restoring better (Make America Great Again). Such candidates are also often inclined to scapegoating groups seen as responsible for creating problems (bringing drugs, taking jobs from Americans). While I can see the parallels between this kind of politics in Europe in the 1930s and what is happening today, there are also great differences. American political institutions, including the protection of individual rights under the Constitution, are much freer and stronger and well established than those of Europe in the 1930s.

Do you think things will settle down or is every week going to be so crazy? Do you think President Trump will tone down his rhetoric at some point?

There will be quieter weeks and noisier ones. It is possible that the cooler heads within Trump World will gradually assume more control (Ivanka and Jared, Priebus, Tillerson, McMasters, Mnuchin, Cohn) and Trump will be brought to some accommodation with Washington reality (including the demands of marriage to a Republican Congress). The tweets careen from wild ("Obama tapped my phones") to Hallmark cards nice ("Everybody enjoy!") and probably will continue to do so. But it is essential to the Trump brand to keep the pot boiling, so there will likely be periodic outbursts of hot rhetoric. And when he goes out to his rallies we will see that version of Trump again and again.

I constantly hear that Trump is attempting to demonize the press. What are your thoughts on that comment?

We have never had a president so obsessed with the media as Trump, although all have been obsessed with their public image to some degree. Demonizing the media is important to his overall message, and essential to maintaining unquestioned loyalty from those who will give it. This is a burden for everyone who is trying to walk any kind of middle path. Ultimately, the media are the source of much of the information we all rely to live. We need a means of getting facts that we can verify, sources for consensus. In the long run, undercutting this will weaken the body politic and increase distrust of all political leaders.

Is there a news outlet that you can't stand yet find yourself watching/reading/listening to?

More than I can mention here. I spend much of my day reading media I disagree with all over the political spectrum. It helps me stay centered, personally and politically.

Where will agriculture meat trade end up in a Trump Administration? Those states are largely why he's there.

I can't see the Southern tier states (other than Florida) or the Central Plains (other than Colorado) becoming competitive for a Democrat in a presidential race any time soon. But if the meat industry takes a hit in packaging because of immigration restrictions and loses markets because of new trade policies, there could be serious trouble for Republicans. They could be challenged in primaries or find new candidates arising who are independent but popular with the conservative base. So there will be fallout from the coming struggles of meat production, packaging and marketing. And those will come to bear on those who have gone along with Trump if they fail to restrain excesses.

How is it that some farmers that voted for Trump did not foresee the impact his election would have on foreign trade that they rely on NAFTA?

When trade is discussed at political conventions or in the media the focus is nearly always on manufacturing. Little is said about agricultural trade, because it is doing rather well. We don't have the equivalent of factories closing and jobs going overseas. It's the squeaky wheel theory. The media, and political unrest, tend to focus on problems and outrages rather than success stories.

Why would you not use the word lie when referring to intentionally misleading statements that are not factual? Why don't you use the word LIE if it's a lie? Shouldn't the public know the real truth?

The public should know the real truth, but it is not always possible to arrive at something all will acknowledge as being the real truth. As for what we hear people say...it is not always easy to tell what someone really knows they are speaking untruth. In some cases they lack the proper information. In others they may be blindered to the point of being delusional. Of course there are times when people intentionally misrepresent reality. It is hard to know someone's intent and harder to prove it -- certainly in a daily news story, certainly to the satisfaction of all parties. The best thing we can do is to show as best we can what the facts are, what those best in position to know have said, what can be readily verified by any individual. Contrasting this with the claims of politicians is probably more effective over time than simply calling them liars.

As the US scrapped TPP, some analysts are predicting a leadership vacuum that will ultimately be filled by China. How likely is this scenario and how does it affect the International meat trade if the US is in the back seat?

In its long run as the leading trade exponent and facilitating power in the global economy, the U.S. did many things that were more in the interest of others than strictly in the interest of the U.S. alone. Now we are rethinking our commitment to this behavior, and our balancing of the pluses and minuses of this role. Indeed we are rethinking our commitment to leading the world. (America First. I am not a citizen of the world. Etc.) This works perfectly on the general timetable of those Chinese who expect to lead the world economy by 2050, with theirs the reserve currency instead of the dollar. Will China be as generous to others in its inevitably rising role in the global trading community?

The Dairy industry currently is battling new entrants and their claims to label their products as Milk. Milk is defined by the FDA to be obtained by a cow, but these new alternatives are allowed to use milk in their claims and market approach. Do you feel that the meat industry will have a similar battle with laboratory-developed proteins and plant-based proteins as they move towards making claims of meat?

The milk debate shows anything is possible. Arguing over what constitutes “meat” is certainly a possible next step.