

Bob Cusack:

And we're back this month with more polling from Mark Penn, I'm Bob Cusack of "The Hill". Mark, as we always do to start the show, one word to describe your polling, your fresh polling.

Mark Penn:

I think this month's word is "HOPE". I think this poll shows that all is not lost for the Democrats, despite a very difficult situation out there. A president with very low ratings, the congressional horse race still remains close, which means that Democrats should not give up the ship here and have some hope.

Bob Cusack:

And that hope certainly would be in keeping the Senate. You know, the House is going to be difficult to retain based upon history and the president's numbers. Why do you think Democrats have had a little bit of a bump here, as you mentioned, and why do you think that the congressional generic polling is, is a dead heat with Biden's numbers still low

Mark Penn:

Well, Biden staying at 38% job approval and disapproval on virtually every major issue. But I think in some ways voters have come to separate Biden who they largely think is incompetent or not a good president from the democratic party and the democratic cause in general, as opposed to the Republicans. And so I think the Democrats have some things going for them, certainly choice in guns, helped rally. I think some of their supporters who otherwise really didn't have a big issue that they could fasten on because the election had been otherwise been dominated by inflation and immigration and crime, all Republican leaning, all Republican leading issues. So, and I think finally, you know, the Republican party is a divided party and Trump is knocking down half of the nominees. Some of the Trump nominees that were successful in the primaries are having, you know, a lot of trouble in the general election, particularly Oz in Pennsylvania. And they don't have an effective message machine out there right now. So, so that kind of tilts the page that maybe the, maybe tilts the odds just a little bit from what would otherwise have been a pretty dire situation.

Bob Cusack:

And of course, Democrats can't get too over confident. The numbers on the economy are not good. There's an intensifying debate on whether we're in a recession or not. Technically we have not heard from this nonprofit group called the National Bureau of Economic Research, which decides that though we have had data of negative growth in consecutive quarters. What the economic numbers mean to you, Mark? And do you think this whole issue of a recession, does it matter? Because a lot of people think we're either in one or we're going to be in one?

Mark Penn:

Well, most people think we're either in one or we're going to be in one, as you say, but we are definitely in a polling recession. If I were the national bureau of polling, would I declare an economic recession? Absolutely. Because we have 67% who say that the economy is on the wrong track and we have 56% of Americans saying their personal economic situation is worsening. These numbers reflect at least a polling recession. For sure. And I do think this debate about recession or not. I mean, you could Google it every single source and news thing until yesterday has always said that that two quarters of contracting grosses a recession. Recession's not a depression, you know. It's an economic event. It could be mild.

It's like rain - it's not a hurricane. So, I do think that this whole debate is getting a little silly and, and that we, you know, I always worry, you know, when people kind of take a [Orwell book] "1984"-ish, you know, "freedom is slavery" approach, you know. Don't change the definition when words go against your party.

Mark Penn:

I really worry about that as a tendency in the public, you know, definitely from these polling figures, it's the way the voters feel it in their personal economic life, it's the way the statistics show it. And so I think that the administration should be talking about how they're going to get us out of it or how it's going to, how they're going to make it mild rather than trying to have a debate about it.

Bob Cusack:

So you think the administration denying that there's a recession and publicly doing so that that's not really working based upon what Americans are feeling right now.

Mark Penn:

It's not, it doesn't, it flies in the face of what Americans see at the pump and what they, what they see in the, in the grocery stores or what they feel in their own personal lives. You know, buffeted by wage increases that don't, that don't match. The inflationary increases that they see in the products that they have to buy. And that's the root of their economic discontent. And going into a state of denial, you know, is isn't really particularly useful. And it hasn't worked for this administration so far. No, the border is not closed, you know, it's how and how many instances can they undermine themselves in this way? So I, no, I think it's a very counterproductive strategy.

Bob Cusack:

The department of justice in your poll, I is not, doesn't have the approval numbers of prior department of justices. And of course what's going to happen now is that at some point, you know, the January 6th committee is going to wind down, they've started to wind down. They might have more hearings in the fall, but there's going to be a big question. And will department of justice indict Trump? What, what did your, your polling find on that?

Mark Penn:

Well, it, it's, it's really kind of some fascinating polling because, you know, a, a, a slight majority of people would say, Trump's actions border on criminal, and he should be indicted. I think that's going to make a big headline, you know, out of this poll, but at the, at the same time, most people think it would be better if we pardoned a lot of the people involved in January 6th and tried to heal the country rather than indict Trump and, and his aids over this. And most people think even after they think he should be indicted, think he should be allowed to run for president because they believe democracy doesn't mean letting anyone who people want to be on the ballot. And I suppose there are some Democrats who are kind of hoping he's on the ballot, but cause they think he can be, they, they think he can be defeated.

Mark Penn:

What I get out of this polling is one clear thing. Indicting Trump will set off a political firestorm, the likes of which the country hasn't seen. And I think it would be a politically unwise move, you know, for that, for that reason, Trump was not, you know, you're, you're basically indicting Trump for his words and

speeches there, you know, and for his inaction, you know, perhaps, you know, during the crucial hour and those are moments that were wrong, and those are moments, I think that get public condemnation, but then moving the justice department against the president in this way, a justice department, which by the way, you know, is at 47 lower than the Supreme court. It, it, it never seen a justice department with these, with these kinds of ratings, these questions about Trump, they split 50 50. They would give Trump a, an enormous pulpit that he doesn't, that he frankly doesn't have right now.

Mark Penn:

And nothing gets Trump supporters going like a big fight. And, and this would be the biggest fight. And these state investigations are just seen as part of partisan hack investigations. So I think it's a big choice, you know, it's, you know, it's a big choice, but I think part of this is, you know, whether or not they're going to let democracy sort this out or not. I don't know. It looks to me, frankly, that justice department is more, is more moving on, that they certainly tend to be doing a lot more on that than, than on the hunter Biden scandal.

Bob Cusack:

You mentioned the Supreme court abortion, obviously dominating headlines and the wake of, of the official ruling, but it's not, it's still not abortion. And women's rights have not moved up in your poll tremendously. They're not, they're not a top two, three issue. How do you think that's playing out? You know, the media, I think does maybe overplay the, the, the pro-choice, you know, people feel strongly about abortion on both sides, not just on one side, it does fire up the democratic base that had been lagging, but where, where do you see that issue? Any surprises there?

Mark Penn:

Well, the Supreme court itself is about 50% approval. As I said, viewpoint's higher than the justice department, certainly higher than president Biden. And, and so it's rating not as high as the 60 plus percent that they generally had. So, so these are controversial issues that the Supreme court has gotten themselves into. I found interesting in this poll that more people were getting comfortable with state legislatures, making the decision after all people, some people wanted a constitutional right to abortion, but a lot of people were interpreting the decision initially as, as banning abortion. And now they've kind of learned, well, abortion's not banned. It's really a state by state decision. You can travel from one state to the other. And, and so as they learned that actually the, the public was almost evenly divided on whether the court did the right thing or, or not. I do think there's, there's probably some effect in terms of energizing, some democratic voters that might not have been energized or some economic inflation voters who may become, you know, suburban choice voters instead. And so I think the Democrats, you know, again, pick up something politically, but I do think the country is getting more and more comfortable with letting the state legislatures make these decisions. It's interesting that state legislatures have really not gotten to make a major social policy decision in a long time because the court has generally made all those decisions.

Bob Cusack:

Another big topic we're going to see more headlines real soon on is Nancy Pelosi's apparent plan trip to Taiwan. We had kind of a "Man Bites Dog" headlines, where we had Republicans praising Pelosi for this trip. You don't see that very often, any praise for Nancy Pelosi from any Republican, but, but people are supportive of, of this trip, which will likely include Pelosi and other members. But we're not sure exactly

when we probably won't know when she's leaving and, or, or when she is going to Taiwan until she arrives for security reasons. But what, what did you find there?

Mark Penn:

Well, I look, I, I think that people are generally supportive of her growing. I, I, I think there are, there are, there's still somewhat concern that substantial concern about China and what China would do. I don't see that you, you see Americans really wanting to provoke a showdown with China. So I think there's a mildly positive support for her, for her going on the trip. But what's, I can really find interesting is when I look at polling about the Ukraine and, and about, and about China, that there's a, there's a new political animal. I've dug the pro war Democrat. I spent so many years doing polling, which the Republicans were for all wars. It is now the Democrats who are like more for standing up against China backing Pelosi's trip more than Republicans going. And it is, it is Democrats who are more behind advanced Ukrainian aid and giving billions of dollars more to, as I, as I said, when we went through the poll, everybody's sort of supportive of the Ukrainians, but the Democrats are willing to pay money than the Republicans, not so much. And again, this is a complete reversal of, you know, 40 years of polling in which the Democrats have always been the anti-war party and the Republicans are now the, the more isolationist anti-war party

Bob Cusack:

I wanna pivot to 2024. We're seeing some interesting dynamics in your polling. Trump still is, is up on DeSantis 52 to 19. If Trump doesn't run DeSantis, first Pence is second. Pence has some decent numbers here, amid some skepticism about whether he could actually win the nomination. And also there have been more and more stories about Democrats, either dodging or saying maybe Joe Biden shouldn't run in 2024. What do you see there? Harris's numbers again, not good, you know, but there there's a sentiment we talked about last month, too, that has continued is that people don't wanna see Biden versus Trump again. And maybe that would, that would spur a third party big,

Mark Penn:

Well, look, I think this is a fascinating situation when you ask them, do they, do they want Trump to run most people nearly 60 say no. If you ask them Biden to run over 70, say no, who is most likely to run at the current moment, Trump and Biden, right? And, and so this is really a choice that the American public doesn't want because they say, well, look, if it's Trump fee Biden, would you support a, a centrist independent candidate, 60% say yes, an astounding number. So these parties are going to have a choice put up somebody that people don't want, or have a, a rough and tumble primary fight and find some candidates that the American public views as having next generation solutions who really take the country forward and execute the, the, you know, the, the job of presidency without either being too wacky or too old.

Mark Penn:

Right. And, and, you know, I think you, when you ask it, why shouldn't, why shouldn't Trump run, cuz he's too erratic and why shouldn't Biden and run, cuz he is not a good president. And so, so I think that it it's a tricky situation. I think DeSantis is sitting there in the wings. He's been consistently rising. Trump looks like he's positioning himself for a run. He, he would not be easy to defeat. Although I think he is potentially defeatable cuz it's getting about 52. And if you, if you're, you know, it's like the old polling we have on incumbents, if you're not voting for him now you're never voting for him. And so I do think he's

got about half the party that, that doesn't wanna see him run. And if you look at Biden, Biden situation, even worse, it's really, it's really almost two thirds of the party that doesn't wanna see him run.

Mark Penn:

And I don't think ultimately he will run. I, I just don't, I don't see how it's, how it's possible that somebody with his kind of ratings and seeing is too old and, and doing a terrible job, can plausibly run, he have primary opposition for sure. And it could be very successful primary opposition this time. He won't, he won't be able, I think to be, you know, you know, receive the kind of cloaking from the press that, that he received in the last time. So, so I, I, it's more likely to be Trump V Harris or someone. And from the public's point of view, I think a DeSantis Harris race, which, which is now a dead, even race, maybe one point for Harris, because most people don't know who DeSantis is actually I think the most likely race at the end of the day.

Bob Cusack:

And do you think that if that happens, if Biden, who does turn 80 later this year does not run that Harris would have a fair amount of company in, in the primary because her numbers are way below water right now. I, I think year numbers are minus 15 at the moment.

Mark Penn:

Well she's going to have to win the primary. I mean, you know, people don't remember like Al gore really started out and looked like he wasn't going to win. Looks like he was going to lose New Hampshire. And then he came back and you know, and really kind of barnstormed the thing and found, found his energy in his mojo. So that's going to have to happen with Harris. You know, I, I can't predict how great or bad a campaigner she really will be. You know, after all these years in the, in the, in the White House and experience with the issues and getting control of the democratic machinery, I, I would say that, that she, she definitely, you know, even though she doesn't poll that well, doesn't poll as well as DeSantis, you know, has a, has a solid chance given the history of the democratic party, vice presidents always get it. Joe Biden was one of those, one of those vice presidents that nobody thought was good enough to get the nomination. And he did. And he's president in the United States,

Bob Cusack:

Last question, open ended, any other takeaways and where do you see us going from here? Because you know, the next polling that we'll be talking about will be post labor day. What are you looking for there and, and right up until the midterm election?

Mark Penn:

Well, I think another topic in the poll is really energy policy and overwhelmingly people care about energy, independence, slower transition to away from fossil fuels. And they would reverse the Keystone pipeline decision president was serious about really trying to win back a lot of lost voters here. He would change the energy policy. You know, it looks like they're going to double down on climate change. Going to go ahead with a, with a bill that's going to have hundreds of billions of dollars. Voters are kind of very skeptical about subsidizing the world's richest person who makes electric cars. And, and so I think the, the energy policy here is one of the things that look, people are looking to to have better economic policy. You're looking to reverse the economic policy. We didn't do it in this poll, but they're looking to reverse the, the immigration policy. And they're looking for, you know, stronger support for the police in the country and Biden is on none of those issues and, and a bill.

Mark Penn:

Now that's trying to support the police that maybe the Democrats will be able to kind of dispel some of their, some of their defund, the police, you know, messaging, but it's being held up because of the people who wanna defund the police are a very vocal corner of the democratic party. And that's so, so I think there's a lot of things to play out here. I always say that labor day is the time when Americans sit around with their family and kind of talk about politics. And at that point, at that point, they're set, oh my God, it's about inflation. Oh my God, we have to get rid of these Republicans. I mean, are these Democrats who've been running us with tax and spend, or it's going to be, oh my God, you know, the Republicans, I just can't stomach them. Even though Biden's not been a good president, we can't abandon the day.

Mark Penn:

I don't know how it's going to come out. Right. I think there's going to be a, a, you know, pretty strong, pretty strong barbecue discussions. And then we'll come back and pull after labor day. And I always find that wow, public opinion really sets in, you know, around that time and then kind of runs through the runs through what we used to call the shoot, the period between labor day, you know, and, and election day, the Republicans usually do their messaging late. They're not organized. They don't have a coherent message out there. They don't have anything remotely like a coherent leadership. There's no Newt Gingrich out there with a, with a contract for America or anything like it. So, so we'll see whether or not they underperform. They have a number of they're saddled with enough of Trump candidates who won primaries, that, that aren't doing that well in some of the key swing states. So I think I agree with you, Bob. It's pretty hard for the Democrats to hold on to the House. However, the Senate is, is another matter. And is this going to be a wave election as it's been setting up to be, or, or will we will all of these new issues and maybe some economic improvements by then reduce the size of the wave to a little bit more of a ripple. We don't know, but stay tuned. And that's what we'll, we'll follow here on the Harvard Harris poll.

Bob Cusack:

Absolutely. It's going to be an interesting to see what if Democrats are able to get extend this little bit momentum they have and hope as, as you mentioned in your next poll. Thanks, Mark.