



ELECTION EVALUATION

Political Impacts on Classroom, Media

By Tom Schuman

It's safe to say our country's political climate is in unprecedented times. Depending on one's partisan leanings, more descriptive adjectives could certainly apply.

For this roundtable discussion, we brought together four people – two university professors and a pair of journalists – to discuss and analyze the 2018 general election. Their insights on Indiana's competitive U.S. Senate race and more will follow. But first, learn a little more through their thoughtful responses to this question: What do these "unprecedented times" mean for you in the work you do – with students and from a media perspective?

Laura Merrifield Wilson (lmwilson@uindy.edu), assistant professor of political science at the University of Indianapolis: "It's very difficult ... requiring students to talk about politics in a way that is political and not personal. Students seem more divided than

ever before. They support a party and it doesn't matter what their leaders say, what the policies are, they support it die-hard as though it's a sports team.

"I believe our challenge as educators is to challenge that. I don't care what they think, per se, but it's how they get to that. I'll always tell my students that in order to challenge a different perspective, you have to consider why that perspective exists," she continues. "You can't argue against something if you don't know why people believe it. You don't have to believe it, but you do have to consider why it originated in the first place.

"In my case, I'm just trying to challenge students' beliefs. I'm not trying to indoctrinate them; I'm trying to educate them. And that's a blurred line sometimes, I feel."

Elizabeth Bennion (ebennion@iusb.edu), professor of political science at Indiana University South Bend, says, as in years past, some students are very engaged in politics and others are "disgusted with the whole system." The difference, in part, is "these opinions seem to be more strongly held than in the past."

As for teaching, "One thing for me is a

renewed commitment to focus on critical thinking, on the difference between facts and opinions, how to support claims with evidence and to demand that others do the same." In one course on controversial issues in politics, "Students are required to meet with people who they strongly disagree with on the issue of gun control, immigration reform, torture interrogation technique and other issues that really divide the nation.

"It's set up so that they have to read multiple perspectives, and they come together with a huge list of policy options or discussion questions. It's amazing that never once have I had some group not be able to come to agreement. Even if Congress can't, they will say things like, 'Oh, I never thought of that before' or 'Well, when you put it that way, that seems reasonable.' And so they're actually listening to each other."

Katie Heinz (katie.heinz@wrtv.com), Indiana Statehouse reporter for WRTV-6 in Indianapolis: "I don't think the current political climate has directly impacted how I do my job. I think it has shown that it is as important as ever to cut through the noise with a number of different



“When you look at the Senate for Democrats, they only have so much money they can spend on Heitkamp (North Dakota), Manchin (West Virginia) and Donnelly. They have to strategically figure out where they are going to spend that money, or do they pour more of it into the House races?”

– Laura Merrifield Wilson

sources and ways that people get things.

“The TV industry as a whole has changed significantly in the five years I’ve been here,” she notes, outlining the declining nightly news viewership and the increased focus on social media and online outlets. “The use of social media has certainly played a direct role in the tone of our discourse.”

Political rallies in the last few years have resulted in change. “We’ll be on the riser (media area) first and we’ll have people who are turning around and taking photos of us and saying things to us that perhaps we haven’t heard in the past. That has been a different dynamic, but I would say the job itself has not changed.”

Brandon Smith (bsmith@ipbs.org), Indiana Statehouse reporter for Indiana Public Broadcasting and host of the *Indiana Week in Review* television program, agrees with Heinz while adding, “What has changed for me is not how I do my job, but how I feel when I go home at the end of the day.

“Every now and then when I go home and I’m not in a good mood, I wonder to myself: ‘So it’s important that I do what I do, but does it really matter anymore?’ Because this idea that reality itself is up for debate, that the things I can report on in an incredibly truthful way, in what I hope is a fair and balanced way, does that matter to people who might be listening or reading?”

He adds, “Is the audience only hearing what they want to hear no matter what my story says? Will people listening to it or

reading it or hearing it or seeing it believe it? That wears at you a little bit.”

Donnelly vs. Braun

Analyzing an intriguing U.S. Senate race nearly four months ahead of Election Day doesn’t come without peril. The panel looked at some of the factors in play as of mid-July in the contest between incumbent Joe Donnelly and challenger Mike Braun.

“Because every issue could influence voters, we always say, ‘Well, how will it impact the election?’” Wilson comments. “But the big question is: What do voters actually remember? Only so many of those things can matter to a normal person who can’t possibly keep track of it all.”

Those “things” include, for example, tax reform of late 2017, the ongoing battle over health care and, more recently, tariffs and trade, as well as the Supreme Court nomination of Brett Kavanaugh.

Smith contends that the Supreme Court confirmation vote is especially tricky for Donnelly.

“Because on the one hand, do you want to further alienate your liberal base and risk a lack of enthusiasm from them when you’re going to need it? If you do make that vote, you obviously are (going to) attract Republican voters. But are they going to be caring about that when they go to the ballot box in November?”

“The (Neil) Gorsuch nomination (Donnelly was one of three Democrats to support his confirmation in April 2017), certainly you can take a direction from that, but this is very different,” Smith continues. “That was a conservative replacing a conservative. This would be a conservative replacing a more moderate justice and that could shift the balance of the court for decades – one of the most critical nominations we’ve seen in a long time.”

The nomination is also tied to health care, as Bennion points out that Kavanaugh’s ruling “gave the Supreme Court the logic it needed to not strike down the Affordable Care Act.”

Heinz adds, “One thing we’ve heard from Judge Kavanaugh and seen in his previous writings is that he sees importance in precedent. From Democrats, we’ve heard about the concern of whether the next justice will overturn *Roe v. Wade*.

“That could be something that could work in Donnelly’s favor if he were to vote for Kavanaugh and point to the fact that

Kavanaugh has said that he sees value in upholding precedent.”

Bennion provides an overview of Donnelly’s approach while in office.

“Donnelly has worked very hard to portray himself as one of, if not the most, bipartisan members of the Senate. There is a lot of pressure on him to keep his base happy enough. . . . At the same time, he knows that he needs to win a lot of Republican votes. He’s very aware of his precarious position as a Democratic senator running in a red state, and I think we see that in the messaging he uses (and) in the votes he chooses to highlight.”

Wilson notes the interesting facts of Donnelly’s status as a Democrat who has voted with Republicans and Braun’s history of having been previously registered as a Democrat.

“This is a state where Trump won by 19 points; this is a state that has traditionally been Republican, and part of what made Donnelly successful is that he’s been able to toe that middle line,” she attests. “I think partisanship with Braun and Donnelly in the Senate race is most complicating and fascinating.”

Congressional control

While Indiana’s U.S. Senate race is at or near the top of the radar screen for many, the opposite is generally true for the U.S. House.



“It (the U.S. Senate primary) was particularly nasty, a lot of money coming from all sides. In the final debates, certainly the two candidates shifted their focus to attacking Braun, but before that it was Todd Rokita and Luke Messer fighting each other.”

– Katie Heinz



“What issue is going to decide this election? If it’s the economy, that’s so broad, it might be on an almost voter-by-voter basis – what the economy means to them and whether they think it’s a good thing or a bad thing.”

– Brandon Smith

“The 2nd District (incumbent Jackie Walorski in a repeat race against challenger Mel Hall) is always one you keep an eye on where maybe something surprising can happen,” Smith suggests, “but if there’s one that’s going to switch, it’s the 9th (first-term Trey Hollingsworth facing Liz Watson). This is something that Democrats nationally have been focused on.

“I still expect him (Hollingsworth) to win. But if we talk about really high turnout numbers, which tend to help Democrats, of the nine (Indiana districts), it’s certainly the one that’s the most in play.”

Heinz concurs while Wilson identifies a bit of irony in the fact that the open seats are in the 4th and 6th districts, but the true races in both were in the primary.

Turning her attention to the broader control of Congress, Wilson adds, “For a long time, it seemed like the Democrats might be able to take the Senate. Now, if they’re going to take anything, it will be the House. They need 24 seats. If they’re going to get one from Indiana, and that’s the most they’re going to get, it would be the 9th.”

Bennion further breaks down the control for Congress. “It is incredibly tight right now (in the House) with most folks predicting about 199 for the Democrats and somewhere between 208 and 210 for the Republicans with the rest being a toss-up. So, 26 to 28 of those toss-up seats will determine control.

“It is important to understand that we only have 35 seats up in the Senate, with Democrats being on the defensive because 26 of those are held by Democrats. That is a lot of seats to defend while you’re trying to increase your share of the total seats.”

Turnout, as always, will be one of the key factors.

“I always want to say it (turnout) probably can’t get worse, but that’s not a challenge to the Hoosier electorate,” Wilson says with a chuckle. “I don’t want to see it get worse.” She believes the close Senate race will encourage more people to go to the polls.

Ground games and personalized get-out-the-vote efforts will be paramount, Bennion offers. She also puts some numbers into play.

“In 2012, when Donnelly was running last time, we had 22% (turnout) in the primary. That’s similar to the 20% this year. The general election (in 2012), we had about 58%. We can probably expect between 55% and 65% turnout – and let’s hope for the high end.”

An additional ingredient in the mix, according to Smith: “Democrats have more people running in various ways than they have before, for Statehouse and the higher races. Most of them are not going to win, but just having somebody on the ballot will certainly help get more people out to the polls.”

But *more* voters is not always the goal, Smith attests.

“The ad campaigns – it’s not about changing minds. It’s just about trying to get people to the ballot *or not*. And the ‘or not’ is the real problem here because it’s not ‘Oh, we want as many people to vote as possible’; it’s, ‘No, we want these specific people to vote.’”

Back home in Indiana

Bennion, with tongue in cheek, volunteers the prediction that the Indiana House and Senate will not change party control in 2018. She and the others are well aware a reversal is mathematically impossible in the Senate (41-9 advantage for the GOP) and would take a wave of seismic proportions in the House (70-30 margin).

Only two incumbents – Joe Zakas and Dick Hamm – were defeated in their House primaries. Smith says a common factor in both races was that the successful challengers were “true political outsiders (who) hadn’t really run for political office before as far as I could tell. Again, that is something that kind of appeals to people.”

Heinz reveals that other contested primaries drew additional attention, but at this time it’s difficult to identify hot-button races in the general election.

Some students, Bennion points out, believe the Indiana General Assembly has always been controlled by Republicans. She

shares with them the past shifts, particularly in the House, but as for 2018, “I don’t think the conditions are extreme enough to move the needle much in the direction of the Democrats at the state level, and we’ll see if they pick up anything at all.”

Smith adds, “For the Democrats, it’s about managing expectations. (Taking control) shouldn’t be their goal and it isn’t. Their goal at this point is to break the super majority in the House.”

Keep an eye on ...

We concluded by asking the panelists what one or two items they will be keeping the closest watch on as we move closer to November. What might shift the outcomes?

Heinz: “I think the money, the ads. Also trade, seeing how this plays out for farmers in rural counties who voted for the President.”

Wilson: “I’d say mobilization and turnout. We’ve seen a lot of protests and debates. Who actually shows up at the polls will be most influential.”

Smith: “The President. What, if anything, will he do that might shift the balance of this election for or against Mike Braun.”

Bennion: “Watching Donald Trump and what he says and does on trade, on immigration, on other issues because that could have an effect on rallying Republicans and mobilizing Democrats. The Mueller investigation could shift things as well and create a grand political drama.”



“We hosted candidate forums and debates in St. Joseph County and Elkhart County for the primary elections and we had a record turnout at all of these events. There was an unprecedented level of attention and people showing an intense interest.”

– Elizabeth Bennion