

The 2020 Election with Tiffany Cross, Rick Wilson and Rich Thau

<https://www.climateone.org/audio/2020-election-tiffany-cross-rick-wilson-and-rich-thau>

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Greg Dalton: This is Climate One. I'm Greg Dalton. [pause] For some voters, the presidential election is all about personality.

Rich Thau: Are they Coke or are they Pepsi? They're both, they like both kinds of soda. They can vote for a D or vote for an R depending upon who attracts them more.

Greg Dalton: For others, issues and policy will drive their decision.

Tiffany Cross: There are a lot of questions about policy and because these mostly marginalized, disenfranchised communities are overly impacted. So they can't afford to not pay attention to policy.

Greg Dalton: But as the country struggles to reckon with structural racism, the pandemic, and the looming threat of climate disruption, how will current conditions affect the vote?

Rick Wilson: There is a price tag in terms of lives and in terms of our economy and we're going to articulate that in the ways that as former Republicans we're very skilled at.

Greg Dalton: Looking ahead to the 2020 election. Up next on Climate One.

Greg Dalton: Is the 2020 election (shaping up to be) more than a referendum on the current president? Climate One conversations feature energy executives and environmentalists, Republicans and Democrats, the exciting and the scary aspects of the climate challenge. I'm Greg Dalton.

Greg Dalton: The conventional wisdom on this fall's election is that it once again will come down to a handful of voters in a handful of states.

Rick Wilson: This is a game of small numbers. Going out there and hunting down these small pools of persuadables is critical because we're in an Electoral College game.

Greg Dalton: Rick Wilson is a longtime Republican political strategist who got his start campaigning with the first President Bush. He's editor at large at The Daily Beast and author of *Running Against the Devil: A Plot to Save America from Trump--and Democrats from Themselves*. For these persuadable voters, personality usually matters more than policy - including climate.

Rich Thau: Climate change is not a top-tier issue for these swing voters. It kind of falls in the middle between not being a hoax and not being an emergency.

Greg Dalton: Rich Thau is President of Engagious, a communications firm. For the past 15 months he's conducted focus groups with swing voters in key districts, including Youngstown, Ohio, Appleton, Wisconsin, and Erie, Pennsylvania. But not everyone is convinced that concentrating on this small group of voters is the most effective strategy.

Tiffany Cross: I would rather focus on people who have skin in the game, pun intended, and who are ready to hit the pavement.

Greg Dalton: Tiffany Cross is co-founder and managing editor of The Beat DC, and author of *Say It Louder! Black Voters, White Narratives, and Saving Our Democracy*. She previously ran the Washington Bureau of BET News and covered Capitol Hill for CNN. She's skeptical that this year's election will be determined by a handful of voters in battleground states.

Tiffany Cross: I think anybody who's still laser-focused on swing voters is operating from a playbook of yesteryear. I question even this whole theory of swing voters. I think if somebody is still on the fence at this point about who to vote for then they are emphatically not a swing voter. I do think there are people, you know, we have to look at it through the lens of this is not a choice between Joe Biden and Donald Trump. But a choice between, Joe Biden or stay home for a lot of people. So I think with all the attention that you hear in the media landscape that's focus on swing voters, it feels a bit out of step. It feels like a political playbook from 20 years ago and perhaps if we pay attention to the voting trends of midterms, that we would know that swing voters do not necessarily determine presidential outcomes.

Greg Dalton: Rick Wilson. Donald Trump has never shown an interest in growing his base and his support has never exceeded 50% of the American people. Bill Kristol recently tweeted, "He look at the polls and think he can't win. But Trump's path to victory doesn't depend on persuading Americans. It depends on voter suppression, mass disinformation, foreign interference and unabashed use of executive branch power to shape events and perceptions." Do you agree with Bill Kristol?

Rick Wilson: All of those things are correct. This is a battle in the Electoral College. It is not a national election at all. I know how California is going to vote. I know how Alabama is going to vote. I know how Washington State is gonna vote. And I know how Arkansas is going to vote. These are not states that are in play. So the model of swing states still exists. In those swing states we have places that moved from remarkably Obama to Trump. We have voter pools in states like Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Minnesota, North Carolina, Arizona and Florida where there are meaningful number of voters who inexplicably moved from Obama to Trump. And in 2018 they move from Trump to Democrats. So it's really not a matter of swing voters as a pool nationally. It is a matter of these particular states on the Electoral College map have a much different set of impetuses and character, then you might think in the big blue or the big red states. So when I look at a place like Michigan, I see a pool of voters where suburban female voters in Oakland and

Macomb County outside of Detroit who went for Donald Trump, they held their nose in '16 and voted for Donald Trump. In 2018, they said, no more, I can't handle this. I don't want my kids growing up watching this kind of person. So they voted against Trump's enablers from Congress. They voted against Republican candidates down the ticket because they could. Now those folks are gonna be back in play this year. Some will be pulled to the tribal necessities of our politics because both sides and Tiffany is right, we have too intense party bases in this country. Some will be pulled back to that intense Republican base. Some will be pulled back that intense Democratic base. But they are identifiable through survey research, polling, focus groups, data analysis, voter file analysis. And this is a game of small numbers. Look, the president won election in 3 states by 77,000 votes. He won Florida State with 20 million people by 150,000 votes. So going out there and hunting down these small pools of persuadable is critical because we're in an Electoral College game. That game is not about the popular vote. The game is not about the national mood. That is about going into a place like Florida and flipping 150,000 votes or a place like Michigan and flipping 30,000 or place like Wisconsin flipping 43,000 votes. So all of these places that were narrow adventures in 2016 we saw in a lot of those places they were former Obama states and voters. We got to flip them back and we got to keep them away from Trump in '20.

Greg Dalton: Rich Thau, you've been talking to these people for 15 months, you know, swing voters. Who are they, where are they, what's their profile, what do they think?

Rich Thau: It's a great question. So it's been a fascinating exercise crisscrossing the upper Midwest for a year and now in the last few months doing it via Zoom. And, I'll tell you there are a few characteristics that stand out about these swing voters. The first thing is I would describe them as serial presidential monogamists. They fell in love with Bush, after a year they fell out of love and fell in love with Obama. They love Obama for eight years, fell out of love with him and love Trump. And for me the question is, are they on a four-year trajectory or an eight-year trajectory. The second thing I'd say is that not all but a sizable number are what you'd call classic low information voters. They get their news from local news sources local TV local websites the majority are not getting it from CNN, MSNBC or Fox. So what they know about what's going on in the wider world, wider policy conversation is actually quite limited. Most of them have never heard of the Green New Deal for example. So as we think about who they are we have to understand that their personalities are such that they're not driven by policy as much as they're driven also by personalities and they're driven by a desire for change. They are sort of perpetually dissatisfied. They start off satisfied, the satisfaction wanes and it wanes to the point where they're looking to take on something new. Now there's always a classic, you know, are they Coke or are they Pepsi? They're both, they like both kinds of soda. They can vote for a D or vote for an R depending upon who attracts them more. It's not a matter of either or it's an and. And they just have to decide which one is more attractive. And those are the thing that I think are key attributes of those votes.

Greg Dalton: Tiffany Cross, you still think that there's too much attention played on these, you call them mythical swing voters?

Tiffany Cross: I do. Look, I think Rick's point for sure about the electoral map. But I think still if you look at 2016 and 2018 and even 2012 this Obama-Trump swing voter. When you look at the reason why they jumped from Obama to Trump, the chief reason among them was they all held racial ambits. They had hostile views on race. And so, for me, if that is what we're calling a swing voter, it does trouble me that candidates get it drilled into their head that that's the person you need to go after. And there's data to back this up. There was a study done by UCLA, Princeton and UC Irvine that these aggregate voters who switched who are the Obama-Trump voters, and they found they were not likely to be suffering economically but suffering from animus on race issues. So I am just a bit uncomfortable at trying to appeal to that wing or base of the party particularly when you saw in 2018 when you try to energize the Democratic base, when you spoke a language directly to

people they paid attention and they became engaged in the process. There was a lot of first time voters, a lot of younger voters. And then so, Tyler's point about they get a lot of their news from local news. I think that's a huge issue because on the national stage sure we have Fox News and they're problematic. But at the local level you do have Sinclair Broadcasting which is extremely conservative, they mandate scripts that their anchors read they tailor their messaging that favors conservative right-wing Republican messaging. And that feeds by osmosis this Trump narrative about this country. So when we look at what happened on the democratic side of politics, at voters who resurrected Joe Biden's campaign. And then when you take a step back and look at the larger landscape at people who can be excited and engaged in this process. And then when you consider what all these people have to leapfrog over when it comes to GOP-led voter suppression, when it comes to foreign election interference that specifically targets communities of color. I just think what would happen if we focused on that and not people who switched from Obama to Trump.

Greg Dalton: Rick Wilson, is there bias in this?

Rick Wilson: Well, the swing voters that we saw in '18 were Republican women crossing over to vote for Democrats. That's why the Republican lost 41 seats. Those are the swing voters I'm looking for. I wanna hold on to those so they don't drift back into Republican column and there's an interesting pool and Rich maybe able to speak to this, there's an interesting pool of independent men and Democratic men who tend to be less than college educated tend to be a little more exuberant who tend to be union workers who you can get them back by being a fighter for them. You can work them by being a fighter for them. They feel like everybody gets to DC and screws them. And with Trump, because his portrayal of himself was so broad and so vivid for them, they thought he was gonna be the one that save them and he didn't. And the trade deals hurt them and his handling of COVID hurt them. So, there are people out there and believe me there are plenty of people motivated by race in the voter pool, plenty of them. You're never gonna get them anyway, you know, Joe Biden or not, white guy or not, you're not gonna get them. They were motivated against Obama, very much so in a lot of those cases. Those folks tend to be older at this point, thank goodness, right? But they're there in the swing states.

Rich Thau: I'd like to say briefly, keep in mind, these Obama-Trump voters in our experience in doing this in the swing voter project we also have interviewed Romney-Clinton voters. And those folks almost to a person detest Donald Trump. So I wouldn't worry too much about them going back to voting for Trump again the animus there is off the chart. It's the Obama-Trump voters who I think are the key to the swing voter component not the Romney-Clinton voters.

Greg Dalton: Rich Thau, will issues matter in this election or just as a referendum on Donald Trump and will issues matter and which ones?

Rich Thau: Well, I would say, that issues will matter. The question of course what's going on in the country come October and early November, and whether we're still in the midst of a pandemic what the economy looks like, what race relations look like in the U.S., all that is gonna matter plus whatever else might erupt between now and then of course we have no idea. Though, yes, I think issues will matter. I think one other thing I would say though, is that I wouldn't call this entire election a referendum on Trump. I think it's a huge mistake in targeting swing voters to say that oh we'll just make Trump as miserable as possible looking to swing voters and they'll have to take Biden. And in talking to a number of these people you still have to make a case for Joe Biden. The thing I've uncovered which has stunned me and I'm not easily stunned, I've been doing this almost 20 years is how focus group, after focus group folks of these Obama-Trump voters know almost nothing about Biden's biography. They know that he was Obama's vice president for eight years and that's about it. They don't know he was a senator, they don't know he is from Delaware, they don't know anything about his family background. So to me he is a tabula rasa to a massive segment of

these swing voters. And so I'm not convinced that you can beat something with nothing. Biden has to define himself for these folks in order for enough of them to vote for Biden for him to win.

Greg Dalton: Tiffany Cross.

Tiffany Cross: I would just to say, I would add Greg, that's what we drew across the board, Rich. I think there are people on both sides of the divide who don't know a lot, I think you know, all of us in this panel consume the minutiae of government, you know, read eight papers before the sun comes up. Most people out in the country are not doing that they're getting kids to school and figuring out how to pay their mortgage etc. But even the people who do know Biden, I would say are not only excited about his candidacy. I mean when you look at the numbers, and breakdown the data it is mostly a vote against Trump not necessarily a vote for Biden. Which I will say concerns me because if he's not an excitable candidate and you have to consider this new electorate that's a part of this process now. And for them, Obama was their floor not their ceiling. And so previously, you know, people could only see the possible and now people are seeing the impossible and they're asking how do we reimagine America? How do we reimagine every part of the democracy that we thought was written in stone? And so I think Biden has made some mistakes here and there where he's trying to make safe choices and try walk the middle of the road. And I would argue in this time that's how you become political road kill. I think his candidacy is going to hedge heavily on his running mate. So I really hope that he fix the running mate who can excite the masses and people who are used to having a president who, you know, can inspire you and was an orator like a Sunday morning Baptist preacher. I don't think there's enough younger people in the electorate who realize that's a once in a lifetime type candidate or once in a lifetime type president. I think there are a lot people who have an Obama hangover, and think that, you know, we need somebody who is gonna inspire us like that. And politics and policy are not always inspiring, sometimes it's boring, sometimes you have to do the work and actually read about people's platform and how it speaks to you. So I say that to say that I really hope Biden, the Biden campaign understands and realizes that. I think if he tries to make a safe choice that go around that it could be incredibly devastating to the Democratic Party.

Greg Dalton: You're listening to a Climate One conversation about the 2020 Election. Coming up, getting swing voters to think more about climate-connected policies.

Rich Thau: When I asked them, you know, if you knew that this was a problem in your neighborhood how upset would you be? They were off the charts upset. And if you can point to a specific rollback that undermined water quality or air quality where these people live and say that's because of the Trump administration, that would be very powerful.

Greg Dalton: That's up next, when Climate One continues.

Greg Dalton: This is Climate One. I'm Greg Dalton, and we're talking about the upcoming election with Tiffany Cross, cofounder and managing editor of The Beat DC. Rich Thau, who runs the Swing Voter Project. And Rick Wilson, a former Republican strategist and one of the co-founders of The Lincoln Project - a political action committee of disaffected Republicans dedicated to defeating Donald Trump and Trumpism.

Rick Wilson: Well, this campaign runs in basically three columns. The first column is what we do very, very, well, which is keep Donald Trump personally off balance. We make sure that Donald Trump is watching our Tweeter feed 24hrs a day. He knows there's gonna be something new

coming down the pike at him all the time. We're also prosecuting the case against Donald Trump, because from our research we've seen that there are voters who may dislike him, may think he's doing a bad job sort of generically, but we've now got things like COVID where there is a price tag in terms of lives and in terms of our economy and we're going to articulate that in the ways that as former Republicans we're very skilled at. We're going to focus that very, very, fine set of tools we developed over a long period to communicate that message to voters. So they really have a clear choice but it's not just a partisan question it is a demonstration of how incompetent and corrupt and unstable Donald Trump is. And the final part of this will be more persuasion there'll be more uplift that's gonna be much later in the process. Because for right now, there's a value added to this to keeping Donald Trump's numbers in the 40 and sub-40 range. That prohibits him from getting a big lift under his wings that prohibits him from getting the takeoff speed that prevents him from starting to deploy the resources that he's been raising in a smart way. We have been making them burn money in all kinds of places, because they are undisciplined and they can't change that. That is the character of their candidate and their campaign. It'd be great if we go back and have fights about, I don't know, marginal tax rates or what's the carbon level in the atmosphere gonna be, it would be great if we did that. But at the end of the day, more often than not, if I could come out with a hammer and turn the other guy into a villain or a stooge or an incompetent, I'm gonna win. And that's just the harsh reality of politics. People like to hear things they like to hear I've got a plan but honestly, you know, when Elizabeth Warren came out with a healthcare plan that was 650 pages long, all I could think of was I don't know how much time and effort they put into that but about eight people are gonna read that and three of them are Trump opposition researchers who are gonna find the ten things that scare the hell out of voters. So, you know, those sort of fine-grained policy things almost never have the impact that campaigns with the full hope and optimism belief.

Tiffany Cross: Can I just say I agree with you completely, Rick. And I don't feel there's many voters on your side of the aisle. But I just wanna say, I think on the Democratic side particularly voters of color, I think there's a lot of attention paid to policy. Here's the problem, getting to the actual policy in a digestible way. I think Democrats have a very challenging time of making messaging comprehensible. And so, you know, when Donald Trump could get up before an audience and say, we're gonna build the wall, there isn't a lot of intellectual curiosity there to say, but how and who's gonna pay for it and how is that going to work? And so you can say these various simplistic elements or slogans and have people consume them as though they were gospel. When I talk to, you know, tens of thousands of voters over the years across the country covering them, working on campaigns etc. There are a lot of questions about policy and because this mostly marginalize disenfranchised communities are overly impacted. So they can't afford to not pay attention to policy. The challenge is someone is not going to read a white paper, they're not going to, you know, confirm everything they hear on television. And so a lot of people go of word of mouth. I mean I even had, you know, family members after Obama got elected, you know, who definitely pay attention to policy but were not necessarily experts in politics. And so, you know, they would say we voted for Obama and now, you know, the potholes on the streets are fixed and the school board changed this. And it's like, yeah, Obama doesn't have anything to do with that but you are very focused on what your neighborhood is like what the school is like where your kids go to school what hiring is like what the economy looks like. So, I don't know how it is on the Republican side but I think there is some attention paid to policy but they're not necessarily political connoisseurs. And they don't necessarily speak about ways they speak well.

Greg Dalton: Tiffany Cross, cofounder and managing editor of The Beat DC. Alex Cruz is a 45-year-old married man who lives outside Tampa. He grew up in Brooklyn and says over the years he's voted for several Democratic presidential candidates and sat out a few other elections. He also often votes third-party when there's one on the ballot. This November, Cruz says he's still not quite sure what he's gonna do.

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Alex Cruz: When I was more ignorant to politics I may have been drawn to a personality type. How the person spoke, mannerisms or something without knowing everything that was underneath the whole system of how it works in politics and voting. Knowing to about the Democratic Party apparently the working persons party for people of color for minority. And I felt like I was in that demographic growing up being a Hispanic male. It seems like every administration has gone against everything that I would believe in. I don't believe in war or the war on drugs or war on anything. And so who do you vote for, right. There's only two people in the ticket. Biden really represents that system status quo but Trump supposedly doesn't. But at the same time he still does status quo things. So I don't think it matters who you vote for. My plans are to ride in a candidate. I still believe in the power of voting and one idea is to have people from the bottom up get into politics and create parties of their own grassroots and oppose a two-party system that we currently have. Maybe for several years we can accomplish actual policy changes environmental changes economic changes that we need to see before it's too late.

Greg Dalton: That was Alex Cruz who lives in the Tampa Bay area. Rick Wilson, we have Coke and Pepsi we have more choice for soda and a lot of things toothpaste than we did at political parties in this country. Other democracies have more choice. Why don't you spend all that money on creating a third-party or if you consider that to give people really more choices?

Rick Wilson: Maybe I will. Now look, I think we're in an inflection point in our country where a nationalist populist Trump's party is borne out the wreckage of the GOP where a center-right party is borne out of whatever comes from the kind things we're doing and other folks are working on to try to restore limited government and constitutional adherence etc. And I think the Democrats face a similar challenge whereas Tiffany can certainly tell you there is enormous astounding energy on the progressive left. It is very fired up. Now, the flip side of that is there is for the Democrats more competence and campaign electoral experience and ability to raise the money to compete and deliver and win the sort of more Clinton-Obama axis of the party. And as I said to somebody who they like, why is it you guys are able to do the kind of things that Trump campaign won't do and Biden campaigns won't do. The secret of a good set of consultants is that we don't care what you think and we're gonna get to the X, we're gonna get to the goal mark. And, you know, the Democrats to their advantage in 2018 learned you couldn't do a top-down model. You couldn't say, okay we're gonna only run AOC star candidates in Western Pennsylvania and Arizona and Florida. We're gonna only run AOCs instead the speaker very wisely said, okay well we'll run AOC candidates in places they can win and we'll run Conor Lamb candidates in places they can win. So the choice in a party like that is do you stay as a sort of messy coalition or do you hive off to a Bernie Sanders populist style party which can win in a few places. And a Clinton-Obama style sort of broadly center left technocratic liberalism party. It's a really I think that inflection point is coming because the frustration on the progressive side is so enormous with the incremental approach of the centrist Democrats. And on the Republican side that idea of Trumpism is a nationalist populist movement is very addictive so then they want that. And they don't want to go back to the old George Walker Bush thousand points of light or compassionate conservatism, they don't want that they want a war.

Greg Dalton: We're talking about the 2020 election in Climate One with Rick Wilson a longtime Republican strategist and cofounder of the Lincoln Project. Rich Thau, runs a swing voter project that conducts focus groups on Obama-Trump voters in the upper Midwest. Rich Thau, I want to get to climate and environment because this cycle is engaging and we have these macros, you know, issue of climate change. Swing voters you are talking to do they care about the climate do they care about the environment? Where does that rank in terms of issues, Rich Thau?

Rich Thau: It's a great question. So I've been asking about climate and environmental issues

throughout the entirety of the project. And couple things stand out. The first is that climate change is not a top-tier issue for these swing voters. It kind of falls in the middle between not being a hoax and not being an emergency. Basically it's kind of problem that's out there. So if you ask people is it your number one issue, no one is gonna say it's their number one issue but a number of them will put it in their top five. But it's not one or two. The thing that we uncovered to me that is the most interesting and I think from a campaign perspective looking at it from Biden side is that when we asked people to evaluate the rollbacks that the Trump administration has advanced in the course of its term that the folks in our group one were generally did not know about them at all, hadn't heard about them but what they learned about them discovered that they were remarkably negative. And we found that when we gave them a list of 17 of these items and have them score them on a scale from 0 to 10 about how much they support or oppose them. They opposed all 17 and some of them scores it like 1, 1 and a half. Most of them were things related to clean water and clean air particularly clean water. And when I asked them, you know, if you knew that this was a problem in your neighborhood how upset would you be? They were off the charts upset. So I think the opportunity potentially if people in the environmental movement were to seize it would be to make a case not about the rollbacks in the abstract, but the rollbacks as they affect people in the swing state. And if you can point to a specific rollback that undermine water quality or air quality where these people live and say that's because of Donald Trump or the Trump administration, that would be very powerful because it would be a way to tie the things that they don't like about the president to something that affects them personally.

Greg Dalton: Tiffany Cross. E&E News recently reported that Chevron is playing the race card via communication firms called CRC Advisors warning communities of color that white people are trying to take away their jobs in the energy industry by advancing climate policies. What's your response to that?

Tiffany Cross: I think it's unfortunate not surprising but definitely unfortunate. Especially when you think about how communities of color disproportionately impacted by climate. And you consider folks in New Orleans, you know, who are impacted by the Deepwater spill. You think of folks in the low country, South Carolina who are worried about, you know, water supply in the area you think of folks in Long Beach, California or people in Flint who have all the water they can that was, you know, literally poisoning them. So it's sad that a corporation would try to pin this as, you know, one group versus the other with various intention. But I think this is not anything new and something that has consistently happened these, you know, communities have long since even before Jim Crow been in red line communities that are overly impacted by pollution. So, yeah, I think it's unfortunate but I was happy that that story came to light. Again though the challenge is when you present climate issues to people who are dealing with so much already. People who are worried about paying their mortgage people who are worried about violence and unrest. People who suffer from economic anxiety. I just think it's hard to make the case to them that this is something that's impacting your life long term when they are worried about what's impacting their life this very moment. There have been some great work by people to make that connection it needs to continue. It doesn't give a lot of coverage in media certainly not in the lens of the rising majority of the country. So I bet if you ask ten people what do you think about Chevron being disingenuous in this ad. Most people have no idea that that ever happened.

Greg Dalton: Rich Thau, have you tested at all sort of the greening the recovery the COVID recovery whether people want to see a move away from fossil fuels as the country comes out of COVID? Does that have appeal?

Rich Thau: The one thing I've discovered in my years of doing message testing on a variety of issues is that the idea that you want to conflate multiple causes no matter how good they are is very off-putting to a large swath of the American populace. In other words people want you to work on

issue X then address that issue and not necessary leverage in a separate issue, however much merit it might have because it gets in the way of solving the problem at hand. So when I ask the swing voters for example, about addressing clean energy instead of having Congress spend money on clean energy is a way to jumpstart the economy in the midst of this pandemic. They look at me like I was crazy. Their response was no, if you're gonna spend the money there are people unemployed they need money they need income they need jobs. Focus on that don't try to specifically help one industry or one sector to perhaps the disadvantage of others. And with the issue of fairness and for them that just didn't seem fair. So classically Americans have a societal mentality when it comes to public policy and that's one reason why they get shape over SSI benefits when it comes to Social Security for example. And I think that you have to think about that in every message that you have about climate is that if you're gonna focus on climate focus on it or focus on clean energy if that's your message. But to intermingle other concerns into those again, this is not my personal opinion this is what I hear from respondents all the time, which is focused on the issue at hand and don't mix issues together.

Greg Dalton: Tiffany Cross, there's a real energy right now on the left about climate justice and intersectionality in dealing with economic inequality and fossil fuels and housing, etc. Your response there to what Rich just said that that alienates a lot of key electoral key voters.

Tiffany Cross: Yeah, I can see that because I think that even though wing on the left who, you know, laser focus on climate even with AOC, she ran on that issue and that was a big issue for her. I still think there and I say this with respect that it's, you know, but I still think there's a level of ignorance among voters when it's come to climate change. And when I say ignorance I really just mean lack of knowledge. And so I don't know that, you know, to Rick's point if you put something to some in consumable terms that it would alienate them. I think it comes more from people on lack of understanding, from people not being focus on the issue or not recognizing how the issue just proportionately impacts them. But even on the Democratic side, from the politics that I've been involved in, I would still say the environmentalists represent a very small portion of the party. And that's not to say that everybody else doesn't care about it, but it's just not their issue. And when you think about all of the things that are vying for our attention right now, all the issues that the country and the globe is dealing with. There's a level where people can get to where you're asking them to care about everything, so they care about nothing. So I think that's Rich's point about alienating some of those voters.

Greg Dalton: You're listening to a conversation about this November's presidential election This is Climate One. Coming up, why messaging and on-the-ground organizing still counts.

Rick Wilson: The country is not as woke as Democrats often think it is even in places where they think it's woke it's not as woke. And so doing the nut and bolt campaign stuff really matters.

Greg Dalton: That's up next, when Climate One continues.

Greg Dalton: This is Climate One. I'm Greg Dalton. We're looking ahead at the 2020 Election with journalist Tiffany Cross, author of *Say It Louder! Black Voters, White Narratives, and Saving Our Democracy*. Political communications expert Rich Thau. And longtime Republican political strategist Rick Wilson, co-founder of the Lincoln Project. We turn now to our Lightning Round.

Greg Dalton: Tiffany Cross. What's the first thing that comes to mind when I say Ronald Reagan?

Tiffany Cross: A myth. I'd say he was a myth, yeah.

Greg Dalton: Okay. Rick Wilson, what's the first one word or phrase that comes to mind when I say Mary Trump?

Rick Wilson: Devastating.

Greg Dalton: New book coming out. Rich Thau. One word or phrase when I say the Lincoln Project?

Rich Thau: Well, I got to be careful with that. Patriotic.

Greg Dalton: Rick Wilson, what comes to mind when I say Georgia Governor Brian Kemp?

Rick Wilson: Evil.

Greg Dalton: Rich Thau. The person Joe Biden should tap as his VP if he wants to win over swing voters in the Rust Belt.

Rich Thau: Here's my answer. Doesn't matter.

Greg Dalton: Tiffany Cross, the person Joe Biden should tap as his VP if he wants to excite black voters who have that Obama hangover.

Tiffany Cross: There is nobody but for a lack of a perfect option, I'd say Senator Kamala Harris.

Greg Dalton: These are true or false. Tiffany Cross. True or false, you don't like making people uncomfortable

Tiffany Cross: False.

Greg Dalton: Rich Thau. True or false, liberals have much better insight into the way conservatives think than vice versa?

Rich Thau: False. Conservatives understand liberals far better than liberals understand conservatives.

Greg Dalton: Tiffany Cross. True or false, the business model of corporate owned media significantly constrains political discourse in the United States?

Tiffany Cross: True.

Greg Dalton: Rick Wilson. True or false, you have solar on the roof of your home in the sunshine state?

Rick Wilson: False.

Greg Dalton: Tiffany Cross. True or false, your next car will be electric?

Tiffany Cross: I'm car less. So false.

Greg Dalton: Rich Thau. True or false, some swing voters you talk with think EVs and solar power are cool?

Rich Thau: Yeah, I think so they see it as the future. They're definitely inclined toward wanting to see that. The issue for them is cost.

Greg Dalton: Rick Wilson. True or false, Sarah Palin's nomination as vice president in 2008 helped usher in an era of no nothingness and trivialized American politics?

Rick Wilson: Sadly, true.

Greg Dalton: Last one for, Rick Wilson. True or false, Republican leaders Mitch McConnell and Lindsey Graham sold America to Trump for a few dozen federal judges?

Rick Wilson: Truth.

Greg Dalton: They got that one. Alright thanks for getting through the lightning round. We have some questions from Lauren online has a question. "Please talk about voter suppression." Rick Wilson, this seems to be just like shamelessly out in the open and it's not even hiding anymore.

Rick Wilson: For an awful long time in this country voter suppression and voter fraud were both marginal activities. There were individual counties and individual people who would either try to prevent voting or who would engage in voter fraud. It has scaled up to a point now where the implications, so that's why I call Brian Kemp evil. Because as a limited government constitutionalist conservative who believes in individual liberty and your right to vote being one of the most fundamental rights that we have. Engaging in the kind of behavior that we're seeing there the kind of behavior we're seeing out of the Trump campaign while trying to prevent early voting, especially in the time of a pandemic. It has reached a point I think where a constitutional remedy in the future is may well be required because it is really gone to the point of things like we're seeing today in Kentucky with one polling place for almost 600,000 voters. That's insanity.

Greg Dalton: Tiffany Cross.

Tiffany Cross: So I love Rick and I hate to disagree to my friend, Rick, but I have to say, Rick, I don't think there's been an uptick. This has been something that's so prevalent particularly in the African-American experience. They're not entire political engagement in this country. I don't think you can ask any black voter has there's been an uptick in the past two years, four years, ten years. I think, you know, throughout history, there's been a concerted effort to make the path to the ballot box very narrow. Brian Kemp didn't just start this two years ago, his entire career was predicated on voter suppression. He literally jailed people. There were in Michigan during the 2016 election, there were 75,000 people in Detroit that have their ballots turned out. Detroit happens to be the most populous city in the country overwhelmingly comprised of black voters. You can go into every local legislature and look at their practices and the majority of the states when you look at things that were designed to be look at how Mississippi how they have designed how people are elected. It is specifically designed so black votes are either diluted or completely left out of the process. I think why there are maybe thoughts that voter suppression has had an uptick is because the media for the first time started paying attention. Whereas previously, they used to just baking into the cake. They would just assume that voter suppression was happening and the only time they would cover it is if a race was competitive. During the 2018 elections there was not a lot voter suppression stories. In fact they tend to report which covers new stories found that between September and November in 2018 across all the major networks, there are less than ten stories on voter suppression. And we all know there was a lot of voter suppression happening in 2018. So Rick and I both agree that it's an issue I just wanted to make the point that it certainly not a new issue and it's been something that black communities and lot of other communities of color have been grappling with for a very, very long time.

Rick Wilson: My point about the scale up is particularly about the White House and the Trump campaign trying to suppress mail-in voting now. You're absolutely right, especially for African-American voters over the decades. But they're trying to suppress early voting and absentee voting at scale talking nationally now where they're looking to disenfranchise --

Tiffany Cross: White people that's why it became a story.

Rick Wilson: Tens of millions of people in states that they choose that they feel at risk in. And Georgia is one of the states they now feel at risk in. And that's why Kemp has been very much front and center in efforts to turn down the ability to vote and to select lobbyists it's like a voting system giving them to lobbyists who are not friends of representative government I should say that.

Greg Dalton: Patricia online has a question. "Can we revive the voting rights act and how?"

Tiffany Cross: It would take a lot. When SCOTUS killed Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act it devastated the voting process. And I think part of the reason why people didn't realize what an issue voter suppression was until there are mail-in ballots because not everybody recognizes what voter suppression looks like. And so, what you saw in Wisconsin, people standing in line in the cold in the rain. And the networks paid attention and said, oh this is insane. Well, that happens every election cycle. State, Federal and local elections in most black neighborhoods they purge list, they shutdown polling sites. So every time it's time to vote, you have people waiting in line for hours. It wasn't like it didn't exist before but once the court killed Section 5 which said that these municipalities which previously had a history of voter suppression have to check in at the federal level before adjusting their laws where they found loopholes in that before, now they can be out in the open about it. Even when it comes to gerrymandering and redrawing districts. I mean, partisan gerrymandering is not illegal but racial gerrymandering most certainly is. And you even see a lot of that happening something Attorney General Eric Holder is pursuing.

Greg Dalton: Rick Wilson, you say that liberals are actually in a little bit of a fantasy land about the causes of their setbacks. Gerrymandering, the Koch brothers, Citizens United. Tell us about that liberal bubble that you think that you mentioned in your book.

Rick Wilson: I have beaten a lot more liberal and Democratic candidates by just being better at the work and having candidates who work harder who works smarter who raise more money run better ads had better messages than by any like weird secret sauce out there from Citizens United or Koch Brothers anything else. And I'd say this with tough love. None of the tools that my side uses are secret. None of them are secret. None of them are illegal, some of them are illegal but I don't use those. But none of the things that are out there to win elections are as a tiered mysteries. It is a process. It is a skill. It is a discipline. And a lot of the times I've seen Democrats come out of race and say, well, the dark money beat us and often it didn't or Citizens United. Well, Citizens United has not been here for that long in my career we were winning thousands of seats across the country without it. So there is a tendency among so my Democratic friends to do what my dad used to say, making excuses not reasons. Sometimes you'll see a, you know, super PAC money come into a race and splash it and change the outcome. Lately that's more on the blue side than the red side since the Republican Party has shrunk down to it's like tiny little stub of what it was. But I encourage Democrats to not ascribe to mysterious outside forces what can be laid on the surface of just not doing the hustle not doing the work not being out there recruiting great candidates. Candidate recruitment is a weak spot for Democrats because there is a tendency and I say this broadly, there is a tendency to want an ideological homogenous thing. So they tend to want to recruit candidates in a purple seat or a state that look like candidates that make them happy nationally. So that's when you get, well actually let me flip the example. If you gave me 20 Connor Lambs I can go snatch up 15 more Republican seats for the Democrats. You give me 20 AOCs, no additional. It's gonna be where

it is. So the country is not as woke as Democrats often think it is even in places where they think it's woke it's not as woke. And so doing the nut and bolt campaign stuff really matters. Doing good messaging doing the work of organizing on the ground. And I say this a lot, Democrats are holistically bad at politics with their extraordinary parts of it. So sometimes you'll get a candidate who is a very charismatic candidate great speaker, articulate, brilliant, but he can't organize the field operation. Sorry, my dogs are going off downstairs. Barack Obama is one of those rare candidates. Bill Clinton is one of those rare candidates. Too often you get a John Kerry. So it's not the externalities that get you it's the fundamentals.

Greg Dalton: Thank you. Tiffany Cross, I know we're wrapping up to the end here. There's also generational change happening here. We've talked to Fairmont about race. Eliot Engel chair of the house foreign relations committee been in Congress for 30 years. Facing a tough race from Jamaal Bowman former middle school principal in the Bronx first-time candidate. Charles Booker is challenging the establishment. Candidate former Marine combat pilot, Amy McGrath in Kentucky. Tell us about sort of a generational features you're seeing here.

Tiffany Cross: Yeah, I think that's such an issue and you know Rick I was listening to you talk about some of the things that Democrats do wrong and I found myself agreeing with a lot of what you said. To your question, Greg, I think there's the issue that some of these members die in their seats, you know, and it's like you have to groom somebody to pick up the mantle and take the next step. And I'm disappointed that I don't see a lot of that happening. And there's also even when it comes to widening the voting electorate. I mean there are definitely spaces where Democrats benefit from keeping the electorate narrow because that would bring in new voter base, younger voters who may not be as loyal to incumbent candidates. So look, this is, you know, time for introspection on all sides about what we can do to reimagine America and be the collective architect from what this next phase of government looks like. And I think it certainly says something that Charlie Booker came on the scene after being shunned by people in the beltway and he built this ground flowing in Kentucky by being progressive. And, you know, Rick, I do hear you about AOC but I would just add that there are these progressive pockets of the south. So maybe Alabama isn't woke but Birmingham most certainly is. Maybe Georgia isn't woke but Atlanta most certainly is. So I think there are pockets where there is space for younger more progressive candidates to find their pathway and then perhaps energize a new base of voters. Who like I said, these younger voters as we saw with the TikTok users and the Trump campaign easily dismissed that as, you know, a prank but that was activism. That is young people saying we do not like the direction of this country and we may not be old enough to vote but we wanna make our voice heard and shame people who are elevating and supporting this man who aims to destroy everything about our democracy. So I hope to see a sea change in some of the newer, younger voters and I hope that it pushes Democrats to think a little more innovatively about how they run campaigns. I think Rick actually give a really good point it's about how that goes.

Greg Dalton: And we have last question from YouTube. Steve asked whether Rick Wilson, Democrats are listening and I would say the same to Rich Thau, are Democrats listening to what you're saying?

Rick Wilson: I think Democrats are listening. We feel like at the Lincoln Project we've sort of illuminated the pathway, we've seen some of the advertising from the Democratic side the super PAC in the Biden campaign pick up an edge in quality. They're not working to make every ad filled up with every single policy. I mean it's truly one of the great little secret is we talk about one thing per ad we don't try to shove everything into it. We think the Democrats are listening in that regard. We also think they're listening in trying to avoid culture where pitfalls and electoral pitfalls going forward. So we feel like we're making a difference and having a positive impact right now.

Greg Dalton: Quickly, Rich Thau.

Rich Thau: And I would say with the swing voter projects which is swingvoterproject.com, all of the videos of all of the sessions are available for free to anybody who wants to watch. So if Democrats wanna pull from it or Republicans, it's out there it's all public and I'm happy to talk to anybody who ask me my opinion on it. So I'll leave it at that.

Greg Dalton: You've been listening to a conversation about the 2020 Election with Tiffany Cross, cofounder and managing editor of The Beat DC and author of *Say It Louder! Black Voters, White Narratives, and Saving Our Democracy*. Rich Thau, President of the communications firm Engagious. And Rick Wilson, editor-at-large at The Daily Beast and author of *Running Against the Devil: A Plot to Save America from Trump--and Democrats from Themselves*.

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Greg Dalton: Kelli Pennington directs our audience engagement. Tyler Reed is our producer. Sara-Katherine Coxon is the strategy and content manager. Steve Fox is director of advancement. Devon Strolovitch edited the program. Our audio team is Mark Kirchner, Arnav Gupta, and Andrew Stelzer. Dr. Gloria Duffy is CEO of The Commonwealth Club of California, where our program originates. [pause] I'm Greg Dalton.

Music: Out