

THE ANNENBERG ROUNDTABLE

Conversations
on Politics,
Media, and
Society

AT THE 2024 RNC

MILWAUKEE, WI
JULY 15-18, 2024



USC Annenberg
School for Communication
and Journalism
*Center on Communication
Leadership and Policy*



in collaboration with

POLITICO



NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR

The Annenberg Roundtables on Politics, Media, and Society served as an intellectual hub at the 2024 Republican National Convention in Milwaukee, WI. Expert panels, composed of journalists, political figures, historians, and international leaders, explored a range of issues during three days of roundtable conversations.

Continuing a tradition inspired by Walter and Leonore Annenberg, the USC Annenberg Center on Communication Leadership and Policy and the Annenberg School at the University of Pennsylvania engaged students, guests, and experts in discussions during a moment when the most important leaders are gathered.

As I told attendees at the opening of our RNC program, “Conventions are a time when nominees are selected and platforms are adopted, but it is also a time for dialogue about important issues. We think universities have a role in doing that.”

Once again, we were delighted to have POLITICO as a partner. We were also pleased to be joined by special guests, including Newsmax host Greta Van Susteren and former National Security Advisor Robert O’Brien.

To watch highlights from our RNC roundtable conversations, please visit:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HxEjTAYE4Rs>.

In a separate report, we describe our Annenberg Roundtable events at the Democratic National Convention.

Geoffrey Cowan

Director, USC Annenberg Center on Communication Leadership & Policy

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GRETA VAN SUSTEREN AND ELEX MICHAELSON OPEN ROUNDTABLE CONVERSATION

Tuesday, July 16



In a spotlight interview, Wisconsin-born Newsmax anchor Greta Van Susteren discussed her time interviewing Donald Trump and challenges to the credibility of modern-day journalism. She participated in an hour-long discussion with Fox 11 anchor Elex Michaelson, USC '08, during CCLP's first day programming at the RNC.

Donald Trump is Van Susteren's most-interviewed public figure, according to her calculations. Long before Trump became the 2024 GOP presidential

nominee in Milwaukee, WI, and the 45th president of the United States, he was a frequent guest called to comment on business news for her Fox News show "On the Record with Greta Van Susteren" (2002–2016).

"He'll tell you exactly what he's thinking," Van Susteren said. "He's very easy. No sound bites from him, nothing. He tells it to you straight."

She believes the assassination attempt against Trump on July 13, which shook the American

public days before the RNC, will not change the election strategy of President Joe Biden. Since the Trump-Biden presidential debate on June 27, Biden has faced questions about his age, memory, and ability to lead.

The economic crisis confronting mass media is further compounding problems in political discourse. Van Susteren pointed out that it is the only profession explicitly protected by the American Constitution, yet it is being chipped at the edges. Strapped for cash, news organizations are struggling to afford to send journalists for on-site coverage.

“You can’t get journalism off the internet. You have actually got to go out and collect it. It makes such a difference,” Van Susteren said. “You have got journalists who are learning their stories off Chat GPT or learning off the internet, instead of news organizations sending people up to actually collect the scene.”

This is one of the reasons Van Susteren appreciates local journalists, who cover community news on the ground. To see CCLP’s recent report on the benefits and future of local news, please [see here](#).

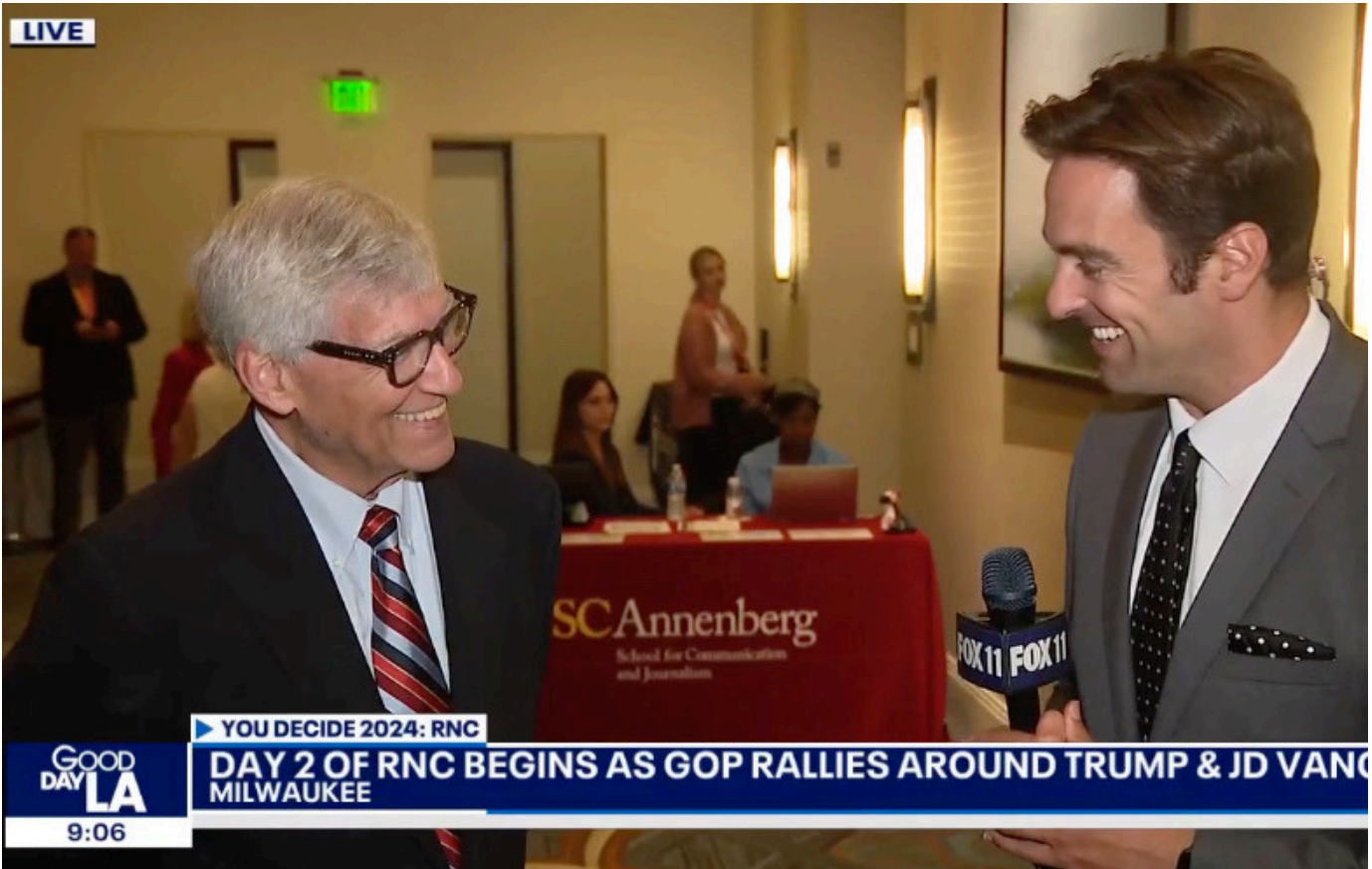
She said another way to improve trust in journalism is for editors and journalists to limit their use of anonymous sources. Michaelson added that journalists also have a role in helping to humanize today’s politics.

“It’s important for journalists to go out of their way to understand their own personal biases and try to surround themselves with different perspectives, too, so that people feel like there’s a home and that they feel seen in a broadcast,” Michaelson said. “If we only do echo chambers, that’s really dangerous.”





Shortly after the spotlight interview with Greta Van Susteren, Elex Michaelson interviewed CCLP Director Geoffrey Cowan for FOX 11 News to discuss the political moment.



INTERNATIONAL BROADCASTING AND PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

Tuesday, July 16

**WITH JOHN LANSING, ADAM CLAYTON POWELL III,
MIKE ABRAMOWITZ, CYNTHIA EFIRD**



The first panel to kick off the Annenberg Roundtable on Politics, Media, and Society was "International Broadcasting and Public Diplomacy." Salon C at the Milwaukee Marriott Downtown, a room serving as the Cowan Forum for the next three days, was crowded with students and journalists interested in the impact of news media on international relations.

Our panel included John Lansing, former president of NPR; Adam Clayton Powell III,

Director of USC Washington Programs; Mike Abramowitz, Director of Voice of America; and Cynthia Efird, Ambassador to Angola (2004-2007).

The world is no stranger to the rise and fall of authoritarian regimes, especially our first group of panelists here at the RNC. With experience in public diplomacy and international reporting, the group taking part in "International Broadcasting and Public Diplomacy" shared concerns about the

impact of rising authoritarianism on journalistic reporting.

“We are, in America, right now in a full-fledged war,” Lansing said. “Budding young journalists like I see around the room here, this is the world you’re inheriting, where it’s going to be harder and harder to get people to believe and understand what is true. The first step is to say there is such a thing as an empirical truth.”

Efird, a public diplomacy officer with extensive experience in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet space, said to look no further than recent history to complicate the idea that news consumers seek out the truth after being subjected to propaganda.

“We found out after the fall of the Soviet Union

that the result of competing sources of news is not a careful reasoning of the truth, but just the feeling that none of it matters,” Efird said. “We have to be less naïve about how people care about and face the truth, but also not overly concerned that anybody with a website can make you believe anything.”

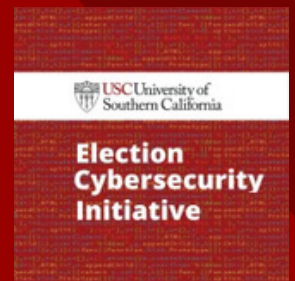
The panelists expressed a hope for listeners in the room, and news consumers more broadly, that they will remember to stay open-minded and engage with organizations they may disagree with.

“It’s up to individual consumers of news to have to take responsibility,” Abramowitz said. “If you are relying on one source of news regularly, then you’re going to get a slanted picture. You got to really be active and try to be an aggressive and smart news consumer.”



ELECTION CYBERSECURITY IN THE AGE OF AI

LED BY ADAM CLAYTON POWELL III



Tuesday, July 16



Make sure to change your password. That is a small but crucially overlooked first step in protecting elections from the AI threat, according to Adam Powell III, a CCLP senior fellow and executive director of the USC initiative on election cybersecurity. Powell hosted the conversation “Election Cybersecurity in the Age of AI” to discuss USC’s efforts to shore up election security, in the U.S. and worldwide.

“It’s very hard to change the vote,” Powell said. “What’s easier is just to attack democracy itself and attack the truth. The difference now is with artificial intelligence.”

Along with added insights from former NPR president John Lansing, Powell presented cybersecurity tips and vulnerabilities developed

out of his series of USC election security workshops, launched in January 2020. During that year, he brought workshops to all 50 states.

Polarization has intensified since then, and funding has decreased for election security initiatives. For the 2024 election, additional concerns include outdated voting software and the use of AI to penetrate voting data. Powell said the good news is that countries concerned about election security will be able to compare best practices and strengthen information sharing.

“I think that you’re going to find more and more leadership coming from places that you don’t expect,” Powell said, highlighting Estonia and Ukraine as example resources for their success in combating many large-scale Russian cyberattacks.

AMB. ROBERT O'BRIEN

OPEN ROUNDTABLE CONVERSATION

Wednesday, July 17



Former national security advisor Robert O'Brien surprised guests with an unannounced appearance during which he talked about conducting foreign policy under former President Donald Trump. He engaged in conversation with University of Pennsylvania Annenberg's David Eisenhower and CCLP Director Geoffrey Cowan.

O'Brien recounted the foreign policy successes achieved under the Trump administration and offered his thoughts on a second-term Trump foreign policy. The policy is likely to combine realism, peace and strength, which are values he said are demonstrated in the first term.

"You see those peace deals, you see the ability in the military, and you see defeating our adversaries—taking out the biggest terrorists in the world, Qasem Soleimani and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi," O'Brien said. "That is what America will look like."

Among those sitting in the audience was New Zealand's former ambassador to the United States Rosemary Banks, who worked closely with O'Brien across three of his recent government positions. She thanked him for directing attention to the Indo-Pacific under the Trump administration.

O'Brien shared concerns with Cowan, director of Voice of America from 1994 to 1996, about how mass media is changing the geopolitical landscape. He said institutions like Voice of America help display the United States as a "shining city on the hill," which provides a lifeline as well as a sliver of hope for citizens living under regimes with strong state media.

"I don't think we've spent enough money on Radio Free Europe, Voice of America and those sorts of institutions, probably since the end of the Cold War," O'Brien said. "We really need to reinvest in those because our adversaries are using mass communications to undermine us."

He said one of the U.S.'s greatest advantages is its network of allies, especially in the age of growing strategic competition with China and Russia. He highlighted the "Five Eyes" alliance comprising Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States. From administration to administration, many core policies remain in place.

"In American foreign policy, there's oftentimes more continuity in foreign policy than you would expect," O'Brien said.



Ambassador Rosemary Banks from New Zealand thanked O'Brien for his focus on the Indo-Pacific region as US national security advisor.



POLITICS AND THE MEDIA IN THE 2024 ELECTION: SHAPING THE NARRATIVE

Wednesday, July 17

**WITH ANITA KUMAR, JESSIE OPOIEN, KAREN TUMULTY,
DAVID URBAN**



An esteemed panel of journalists, brought together by CCLP and POLITICO on the second day of the Annenberg Roundtable RNC series, discussed the challenges of meeting news consumers where they are. Anita Kumar, senior managing editor of POLITICO, moderated the discussion.

Panelists included Karen Tumulty, The Washington Post columnist; David Urban, CNN commentator and political strategist; Jessie Opoien, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel state politics reporter; and Anita Kumar, POLITICO senior managing editor.

Journalists covering the RNC convention, and news in general, are attempting to keep pace with viewer demands for online content, communicated in short informational bursts and viral moments. Tumulty, a columnist with The Washington Post, said compared to the 2016 convention she has had to greatly diversify her journalistic mediums due to consumption demands.

“In the time that I have been here, I have done a podcast, I am running a text, I have done a live chat on the web,” Tumulty said. “The pressure is just constant to be getting out content in so many



different ways because what we're trying to do is reach people where they are."

Tumulty and Urban agreed that the 2024 GOP convention has run much more smoothly than 2016, when delegates and candidates sparred over the future of the party, including the notable moment when main rival Ted Cruz refused to endorse Donald Trump and told voters to "vote your conscience." Cruz, along with other former challengers Nikki Haley, Marco Rubio, Ron DeSantis and Vivek Ramaswamy, attempted this year to present a unified front.

Urban said the decision to rally behind Trump, especially following the attempted assassination attempt over the weekend, has led to a larger-than-life convention with immaculate stagecraft.

"The vibe in the arena is definitely not 2016. It's something like I haven't seen before," Urban said. "It's much more like a Trump rally: a little bit of rock concert, a little bit of church, a little bit of politics, a little bit of sporting event, all wrapped in one."

Opoien is covering the RNC from the Wisconsin's point of view. She said all hands are on deck at the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel to provide balanced coverage of the RNC, one that

answers factual questions for readers, attracts viewers with clip-based content and holds local politicians accountable with on-record interviews. Demand for local news coverage intensified on Tuesday, July 16, when five Columbus police officers in town for the RNC fatally shot a man wielding two knives near the convention.

"We're covering it from every aspect: road closures, the shooting, which diverted a lot of our resources even though it wasn't directly related to the convention," Opoien said. "We are writing about which bars are staying open and is this really going to have the economic effect that's been promised to Milwaukee, to Wisconsin, as a whole."

Trust remains high in local news, as opposed to national outlets, which Tumulty said makes it even more tragic that local newspapers are disappearing. Across local and national outlets, the panelists discussed tension between old guard and young journalists, who disagree about whether to incorporate personal identities into the principle of objectivity.

For students looking to step into a journalist career, the panelists encouraged them to accept entry-level jobs at local outlets, listen to unlikely sources and explore expanding their content outside traditional journalism.

TWO PARTIES? FOUR PARTIES? INTRAPARTY DISSENT IN 2024

Wednesday, July 17

WITH HEATH MAYO, CRAIG SNYDER, JOE WALSH



Regardless of partisan affiliation, there is no denying that Americans are living through a historic era of change, according to our panelists. No longer members of the Republican Party, all three panelists centered their conversation around the party's development since the introduction of Donald J. Trump and how his presence has altered the party's core principles. Craig Snyder from University of Pennsylvania Annenberg moderated the panel.

Panelists included Craig Snyder, president of Haley Voters for Biden; Heath Mayo, founder of Principles First; and Joe Walsh, former Illinois representative and 2020 presidential candidate.

Mayo said the GOP under Trump has lost the values that once attracted him to the party and differentiated it from the Democratic Party. He considers several principles as seriously eroded within the party: character and integrity of leaders matter, truth and objectivity are not up for debate, the constitution and the rule of law are paramount and nobody is more American than anybody else.

"I thought that it was a party that was not engaged in identity politics. Not pitting one group of Americans against another, but really selling a certain set of principles that united the country that would lift us all together," Mayo said. "I saw Donald Trump as a fundamental rejection of that idea."

Walsh's decision to reject the Republican Party came after the 2016 election. In retrospect, he said it was painful acknowledging that he helped elect Trump to the presidency. Many of his supporters were, and still remain, part of the MAGA movement. Soon after Trump began his term, Walsh knew that the party was heading in a direction that no longer aligned with his conservative Tea Party values and made the decision to leave.

"The Republicans now believe in using as much government as possible to get the America they want," Walsh said. "Those of us who believe in a more restrained government are kind of at a loss right now."

With many Americans sharing this sentiment, Mayo hopes the moment is ripe for innovation across the national political system. New leaders

might emerge and perform the hard work of campaigning across the country to win over minds.

"We really need to create new spaces where we can re-engage on the ideas and principles that we think America ought to commit itself to and start to break down some of these barriers that have emerged between us," Mayo said.

Despite their differing journeys out of the Republican Party, all three of our panelists could agree on one idea: change is coming, and it could come in the form of new political parties.

"We're in a country right now where party affiliation means less and less and less," Walsh said. "I tell young people all the time: forget about the parties, grab onto an issue you really believe in and get involved in it."





Renee White and Tim Wadzita, who were attendees of the day's programming, recounted their experiences witnessing the attempted assassination of Donald Trump at the July 13 campaign rally in Butler, PA. The rally was White's 32nd and Wadzita's first, and they recalled their reactions from the bleachers directly behind Trump.



White and Wadzita can be located in this historic photo wearing the same "Tiffany blue" Trump shirt and Hawaiian shirt, respectively.

WHY HISTORY MATTERS

Thursday, July 18

WITH GEOFFREY COWAN, DAVID EISENHOWER, DAVID HUME KENNERLY, JONATHAN MARTIN, KARL ROVE



The 2024 Republican National Convention is already one for the history books, and panelists in “Why History Matters” gave the long view about documenting and researching political history. Geoffrey Cowan, director of CCLP and author of “Let the People Rule: Theodore Roosevelt and the Birth of the Presidential Primary,” moderated the discussion.

For the panel, CCLP brought together a group of accomplished historians, including Geoffrey Cowan, director of CCLP; David Eisenhower, director of the Institute for Public Service at the University of Pennsylvania Annenberg School; Karl Rove, former Deputy Chief of Staff and

Senior Advisor to President George W. Bush; David Hume Kennerly, Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer; and Jonathan Martin, politics bureau chief and senior political columnist at POLITICO.

With a focus on American history, each panelist offered insights into why an appreciation for historical events helps individuals to identify change and gain perspective of the present moment.

Rove recalled a specific instance when knowing history—the 1918 flu pandemic, to be exact—raised alarm bells within the Bush administration

about the state of vaccine infrastructure. At the time, their urgency was heightened by National Institute of Health briefings, when Dr. Anthony Fauci, long-time director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, warned of severe consequences if the currently circulating avian flu made a transmission from bird to person. As a proactive measure, President Bush distributed five million dollars to help scientists find a way to increase the speed and targeting of vaccines.



“History was important because it caused him to think, ‘What can I, as a president, do that hopefully may have an effect on our ability to confront similar circumstances?’” Rove said.

Presenting history is also essential for journalists. Martin said journalists have a responsibility to report both previous outcomes and forward implications, which means presenting the complete context to readers.

“History does not repeat, but it rhymes, as the famous saying goes. I’m always interested in finding those echoes because, if you want to inform people and if you want to do your job as a journalist, you have to tell the reader, have we lived through this? Is this different? Is this the same?” Martin said.

To many American citizens, it feels like they are living through history in this 2024 election cycle. More than ever, it is important to debate how these events, from the attempted assassination of Donald Trump to the 2024 RNC, are framed.

Kennerly has photographed political history since he was 19 years old, beginning his decorated career by taking photos of Senator Robert Kennedy at a Portland airport tarmac. The last time he saw David Eisenhower, who sat across from him at the roundtable, was 50 years ago when he shot an image of Eisenhower and his wife Julie Eisenhower, who were standing on the South Lawn watching Richard Nixon depart the White House for the last time as president.

For the morning panel attendees, he evaluated the latest political photo to make global headlines: the instant Donald Trump survived an attempted assassination on July 13. He discussed the three different shots, taken by AP photographer Evan Vucci, Getty Images Anna Moneymaker, and New York Times photographer Doug Mills, that went viral. Each photo tells a different narrative.

“I’ve judged the Photography Pulitzers. I would have a tough time between Gucci’s classic, almost cliché photo, Anna’s shot of Trump with the blood coming down and then Doug Mills’s

picture, which has a bullet going by,” Kennerly said.

Trump cinched the Republican presidential nominee Thursday night, delivering a speech that opened with an emotional retelling of the assassination attempt and returned to familiar attacks on Democrats, the economy, immigration and crime. Eisenhower advocated for students to pay special attention to speeches.

“Why should we read speeches? Why do we take them seriously? My answer to that is because candidates do,” Eisenhower said. “Here we are in Milwaukee at the Republican National Convention, and we need to understand history.”

Understanding history, according to Rove, leaves him optimistic because it reveals that America has come through darker moments.



Kennerly described the moment he photographed panelist David Eisenhower on August 9, 1974, when President Richard Nixon departed from the White House lawn.



ELECTION KEYSTONE: 2024 PENNSYLVANIA STATEWIDE AND DOWN BALLOT RACES

Thursday, July 18

**WITH CHARLIE GEROW, DAN MEUSER, GREG ROTHMAN,
BRAD TODD**



Pennsylvania is a critical swing state, and especially after the Trump assassination attempt in Butler, PA, experts like those on University of Pennsylvania's second branded panel are zeroing on the most powerful and effective messages that will turn out Republican voters. Moderating the panel was UPenn student Bella Corman, a Pennsylvania native.

UPenn organized a panel comprising of Republican public office holders and political consultants, including Rep. Dan Meuser, U.S. Representative for Pennsylvania's 9th District;

Sen. Greg Rothman, State Speaker for Pennsylvania's 34th District; Charlie Gerow, Pennsylvania Political Consultant; and Brad Todd, Media Strategist for Dave McCormick's US Senate Race.

From speaking with the Trump campaign, Todd said it has a one-state strategy: Pennsylvania. If Trump wins Pennsylvania, then he needs to win only one other purple state, like Michigan or Wisconsin, to cruise to the White House. Todd believes the location of the assassination attempt in one of the most competitive counties of



Pennsylvania will drive turnout.

“We think a lot of voters in the region are thinking about the race that weren’t thinking about it two weeks ago,” Todd said. “Something big happened in the race in their community. I don’t know whose advantage that accrues, but I do think that engagement in that part of the state is going to remain hot through the entire election.”

Meuser was in attendance at the Trump rally. He related his experience witnessing the shooting and described fear in the air until Trump raised his first out of the Secret Service detail, who surrounded him following the shots.

“Frankly, a lot of people right then felt like they were all going to be okay. Chants of ‘U.S.A.’ started as opposed to people running for the gates,” Meuser said.

Gerow said a substantial change in Trump’s Pennsylvania strategy will be an embrace of mail-in ballots, which Trump and the GOP attacked in 2020 for undermining the election. Republicans are also gaming to make up severe

losses in the 2022 midterms. Rothman pointed in part to the effect of the Dobbs decision and changed electoral maps.

“I think you’re going to see a significant number of Republicans vote by mail and maybe still go to the polls and void that,” Gerow said. “But there is a determined, conscientious effort, involving millions and millions of dollars, to focus on getting out the vote early through mail-in ballots. Concomitant with that is an enhanced ballot security effort.”

With Biden’s growing weakness in shoring up support for a Democratic presidential nomination, observers are quietly raising the names of alternative candidates, such as the popular governor of Pennsylvania, Josh Shapiro. From his governing record to political calculations, each panelist thought that choice was unlikely.

“My guess is that he wants to be president in 2028,” Rothman said.

All panelists agreed Pennsylvania was not only a swing state, but the most pivotal state in the 2024 election.

CCLP AT THE ANNENBERG ROUNDTABLE



AND INSIDE THE RNC CONVENTION HALL



Straight from the airport, CCLP made it inside the convention for the first day of the RNC.

Thanks to CCLP Senior Policy Fellow Geoffrey Baum, CCLP got to take a look at the convention hall from inside the CSPAN booth.



CCLP found the California flag flying outside Fiserv Forum, the convention hall of the RNC.