Monday, Oct. 21, 2024 / Category 2024

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): They sadly say that there are only seven states that really matter in this election of ours: Nevada, Arizona, Georgia, Wisconsin, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and do not sleep on North Carolina.

SCORING <Stone Sober – BMC>

STEVE HARRISON (WFAE political reporter): For former President Trump, if he loses North Carolina, it is incredibly difficult for him to win this election. He would have to win Nevada, Arizona, Georgia, and then he would have to win Pennsylvania. I mean, he could win those those other three states and win Michigan, and that's still not enough. So he can do it without North Carolina. But it's really, really hard. And so that's why the Harris campaign is really investing heavily. They feel like if they can take North Carolina from Donald Trump, they basically win the election.

SCORING SPUTTERS OUT

SEAN: But, but, but, but, but: North Carolina is busy recovering from a hurricane. We’re gonna see if they’re ready for election day in the latest in our series on battleground states here at *Today, Explained*.

[THEME]

SEAN: We wanted to understand how Hurricane Helene had scrambled the election in North Carolina, so we asked Steve Harrison. He’s a political reporter at WFAE, public radio in Charlotte.

STEVE: Well, I guess I'll start and just talk about the conditions in western North Carolina. It has been more than three weeks since the storm came through. And, you know, a lot has gotten back to normal: There are roads reopening. Most people have power. Internet is returning. But then at the same time, if you look at the city of Asheville, which is by far the largest city out in western North Carolina, the water service has only recently been restored and not even to all of the city. Now, when I say restored, it's non-potable water. So the main thing that means is people can now flush their toilets.

SEAN: Hmm.

STEVE: But, you know, there are advisories that if you are showering, try not to swallow the water.

*<CLIP> BILL WHALEN: Anytime you have something this cataclysmic, it’s gonna disrupt people’s lives. They’re trying to figure out how to flush their toilets and take care of basic needs. There’s so many people with health care needs… <fade>*

STEVE: Everyone in North Carolina is wondering: how big of a priority is voting going to be for people who have been displaced by the storm? We can back up for a second and talk first about how early in-person voting started in North Carolina on October 17th. Now, the State Board of Elections was able to start it on time in all 100 counties, including every county in the Helene-impacted area. I think in those counties, they initially were going to have 80 early voting sites. It's down to 76. Some polling places have moved, some were inaccessible, some were being used for disaster relief. But there are opportunities for people to vote. The question is going to be, if you're having to, to avoid swallowing water while you shower, how important is voting going to be to you?

*<CLIP> JESSICA MERITHEW: I know that I have accessibility to drive to the polls, but I'm not sure where my voting place will be and if that has changed.*

*<CLIP> KAITLYN LEAF: And information is hard to get because the Internet and cell service is down and everything changes on a day-to-day basis. Sometimes hour by hour.*

SEAN: What is the state doing to help people who might be putting their lives back together vote?

STEVE: So they have given the local county elections board some flexibility to move early voting sites to change hours if they need to. There are about 46,000 outstanding mail ballots in the disaster area. Now, probably a good chunk of those are gone. I mean, many of them washed away. That doesn't mean the people who requested them can't vote. You can request a second ballot and the state will void the first one. The state has made it easier so you can take that completed mail ballot. And under the old rules, you had to return it to your home county. Now you can return it to a neighboring or a different county. That's been one of the things they've done to give people more flexibility. But I'll say this, Sean. You know, there was some talk after the storm went through that would the state legislature and the board of Elections seek to reinstate a three-day window for like a grace period for absentee ballots to arrive and be counted? Under state law now, they have to arrive at 7:30 p.m. on Election Day. Some people thought that they would put a grace period in.

SEAN: Hm.

STEVE: So there have been some changes that have been made, but not – they haven't overturned, they haven't rewritten the book on how the election is going to be conducted in North Carolina.

SEAN: Okay. Let's talk about the actual races and I'll save the big one for last because there's a whole lot more going on in North Carolina. Obviously, local races, county races, the governor's race. How are voters responding to, say, Hurricane Helene when it comes to those races? Are they mad in any particular direction?

STEVE: So, you know, I think the question of are they mad? We'll start with some of the things that former President Trump has been saying.

SEAN: Mmhmm.

STEVE: I mean, soon after the storm arrived, he was very quick to exploit it. I mean, to exploit the government's response.

*<CLIP> FORMER PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: If you wanna see how sick and distorted Kamala Harris’s priorities are, just consider FEMA. F-E-M-A. You know what that is, right?*

STEVE: And that has really ratcheted up the feelings in western North Carolina.

*<CLIP> CBS NEWS: FEMA crews in North Carolina were forced to relocate due to a reported armed threat against government workers…*

*<CLIP> LIVENOW FROM FOX: The sheriff’s office in Rutherford County, North Carolina says it received a call on Saturday about a man with an assault rifle who made a comment about “possibly harming” FEMA employees working in some of the areas hit hardest by Helene just weeks ago.*

STEVE: That's a sign that there's clear among some people there is clear frustration at the government's response. But it's put Republicans in an interesting position because, you know, with so many things over the last eight years, they're having to walk a tightrope between, you know, the reality of the situation and what President Trump believes or what President Trump wants to hear. Our Republican Senator Thom Tillis, who's not running for reelection – he went on CBS about a week and a half ago and said, ‘Look…

*<CLIP> THOM TILLIS, CBS: We can have a discussion about the failure of this administration’s border policies and the billions of dollars it’s costing. But right now, not yet is it affecting the flow of resources to Western North Carolina.*

STEVE: Chuck Edwards, he's a Republican running for Congress in western North Carolina, he's the incumbent. He's been sending out a lot of constituent emails, trying to keep people updated. He even posted on his webpage, on, you know, his official congressional webpage, debunking myths.

*<CLIP> LAURA BULLARD AS CHUCK EDWARDS: Dear friend, over the past 10 days, I have been proud of how our mountain communities have come together to help one another… <duck>*

STEVE: Now, he started his sentence saying, ‘Look, FEMA's response may have had shortfalls.’ He acknowledged that. But then he wrote:

*<CLIP> BULL-WARDS: <duck up> I’m here to dispel the outrageous rumors that have been circulated online: NUMBER ONE: Hurricane Helene was NOT geoengineered by the government to seize and access lithium deposits in Chimney Rock.*

*STEVE:* He wrote that nobody can control the weather.

SEAN: <laughs>

STEVE: So that gives you a sense of, you know, when people are isolated and cut off and their lives have been devastated, how rumors fly, how misinformation takes hold. I mean, you know, you laughed at it, and it is. It's just it's amazing that two and a half weeks before the election, this is one of the things that this is a talking point that nobody can control the weather. I just think it's interesting.

SEAN: So Trump has been trying to use Hurricane Helene to his advantage, spreading disinformation. What is Kamala Harris doing or saying, if anything?

STEVE: The vice president has taken a lower profile. Now, of course, the vice president was in Charlotte a couple of weeks ago visiting with aid workers. The campaign has tried to highlight some of the things that Trump has said:

*<CLIP> VICE PRESIDENT KAMALA HARRIS, THE LATE SHOW: What just upsets me so is that any politician would play political games with these folks, with people who are in the midst of such suffering – loss of life, loss of their homes, loss of normalcy – and then for the sake of political gain, tell these lies in a way that is meant to make people distrust the help that is there for them to receive.*

STEVE: Are any of the people who are there any people in western North Carolina who were thinking about voting for Kamala Harris and are now, after what Trump has said, are going to switch and vote for him? I'm not sure. But people are frustrated. People are frustrated. They've lost… People have lost everything. You know, this may be a way for the former president to rally, you know, to energize his base, to get people to…

SEAN: Hmm.

STEVE: …go to any length to vote for him. I mean, I assume that's what's going on in his mind. Maybe not so much convincing voters, but making sure his people in the mountains turn out.

SEAN: Mm. If they don't, if the people in the mountains don't turn out because of the devastation of Helene – I mean, as crude as this question might sound…

STEVE: No. Yeah. Got to, got to ask.

SEAN: Who does that help?

STEVE: So I looked at 15 counties most impacted by Helene. If you go back to 2020, Trump won them with 55% of the vote. Joe Biden had 44%. If you look at it in terms of a raw vote total, Trump won them by 57,000 votes combined. Now, of those 15 counties, Biden won only two: Buncombe County, which is home to Asheville. That's the largest city. It's very liberal. And then Watauga County, which is home to Appalachian State [University]. So there are more Trump votes. I mean, there are more Trump votes to lose. And let's say hypothetically, you know, turnout is down 10% across the board. Well, that would cost Trump… <doing math> 5… 5,700… 6,000 votes. Now, in North Carolina four years ago, he won the state by 73, 74 thousand votes. So, you know, in a total rerun of the old election, it wouldn't matter. But remember, I mean, if you go back four years ago, Georgia was incredibly close. Arizona was incredibly close. The polls again in North Carolina are showing just a dead heat. So, I mean, I do think! I do think it's worth talking about. I think it's important. I think 6000 votes could matter.

SCORING <An Egg-Shaped Room for Your Thoughts - Lower Rhodes Version>

STEVE: So, yeah, I mean, I think this is, this is something Republicans are thinking about, but I think they feel a little bit better that the impact won't be quite as bad as they thought maybe 2 or 3 weeks ago. But look, if it's incredibly close, I don't think we're going to hear the last of Helene.

SCORING POSTS

SEAN: Steve Harrison. You can find and support his work at WFAE dot org.

When we return on *Today, Explained* we’re gonna ask how prepared the rest of the country is for election day … or is it gonna be election days?

SCORING GOES OUT OF TUNE

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

*<CLIP> SCHOOLHOUSE ROCK: Heeeyy, do you know about the USA?   
 RADIO SFX*

*OLD CROW MEDICINE SHOW, “WAGON WHEEL”: Headin’ down south to the land of the pines, thumbin’ my way into North Caroline…*

SARA MURRAY (CNN political correspondent): I'm Sara Murray. I'm a political correspondent with CNN.

SEAN: Great. Do you cover anything in particular over there at CNN?

SARA: Right now, I am covering all things elections. So election administration, the quote unquote election integrity attempts to subvert the election process, voting, all of – all of that good stuff.

SEAN: And somehow we're like two weeks away. What's, what's top of mind for you right now on this, you know, beat that you've probably been working for a while now?

SARA: There are truly so many things. I think the big one is. Just kind of preparing people to get ready for this to be a multi-day process…

SEAN: Mm!

SARA: …that we just may very well not know who won the election on election night. And everyone should go into that kind of eyes wide open. There's been a ton of like last-minute wrangling, last-minute lawsuits, last-minute attempts to change the election rules, last-minute attempts to get people off the voter rolls and a lot of these states. So we've been tracking a lot of those fights across, you know, the states you might expect: the really big battlegrounds. And so we're trying to keep track of where all of that stuff lands. And, you know, voters are already voting. It's, it's not actually, you know, Election Day as we think of it yet. But this is already underway in a lot of states.

SEAN: So are you preparing people for a multiday, you know, wait to hear results out of an abundance of caution or because from what you see, you know, that's what we're looking at?

SARA: Partly because election officials are, like, begging us to prepare the public…

SEAN: Huh!

SARA: …<laughing> for the fact that, that this could just take a while.

*<CLIP> PA SECRETARY AL SCHMIDT: The message is: please be patient. Our counties are working night and day to count their voters’ votes. They’re doing so as quickly as they can, and with integrity.*

SARA: And that's for a number of different reasons. One is that, you know, we all see these same polls. They show a very close race.

SEAN: Mm.

SARA: So that means it's just a little bit trickier or could be a little bit trickier for media organizations to make their projections of who won. You know, it means we could see more contests over certain batches of ballots. And it also means that, you know, states may just need to get through counting a lot more of these ballots before we can say definitively one way or another, ‘Here's who's projected to win.’ And we know in some of these states, just because the way the laws work, places like Wisconsin and Pennsylvania, it could just take them a little while.

SEAN: Hmm. We heard from Steve earlier in the show that storms are a big factor in the southeast. What about the rest of the country? Tell us about what polling stations are preparing for everywhere else.

SARA: I think in the rest of the country there's just kind of a question about how the soaring rise of skepticism in election results, in the way elections are run could play out around voting and around the results this time around. So, you know, obviously, we've seen Republican groups, conservative groups make a big deal about trying to recruit their own people to show up in huge numbers as poll watchers, as election workers, as election observers.

SEAN: Mm.

*<CLIP> LANCE WALLNAU: And here’s my goal: if at the end of the day, we haven’t activated you to either be a poll watcher, a poll worker, somebody involved with election integrity, or somebody that can help someone else get out a vote, I’m not sure we’ve done what we have to do. Because you guys are going to be the tipping point. Wisconsin needs the spirit of God to move…. <fade>*

SARA: And then when it comes to, like, actually, you know, counting and certifying the results, we've seen a lot of these efforts since 2020 from local election boards to try to block the certification or delay the certification of results.

SEAN: Mmhmm.

SARA: You've seen people who say they're concerned that there was fraud, there was concern there was some kind of malfeasance. And so they just don't want to certify the vote totals. And it's possible that we could see a wave of that kind of thing again, you know, after ballots are cast. And that stuff has to go to the courts, it has to be litigated. And officials in these big battleground states are just really hoping that if these challenges pop up again and if they are numerous, that the courts will be very fast in dealing with them.

SEAN: Hm. And you mentioned Wisconsin and Pennsylvania in particular earlier. Why those two?

SARA: Both Wisconsin and Pennsylvania are in this place where they cannot begin processing their mail-in ballots until Election Day…

SEAN: Mmm.

SARA: …which means in other states that have mail-in ballots, you know, you can check the signature or whatever is required on the outside of the envelope. You can take the ballot out of the envelope. You can flatten the ballot. You can do all these steps to get the ballots just like ready to go for counting. And in Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, you can't do any of that stuff until Election Day. And so it just makes the process slower. And it's a huge frustration to election workers in both of those states. They've really begged the state legislatures to make this change, to allow it to be easier on their election workers to process this, because, of course, it's easier to be able to process these ballots ahead of time and just to be, you know, essentially counting them on Election Day while you're also dealing with running, you know, the in-person election <laughs> …

SEAN: Yeah.

SARA: …on Election Day. But the state legislatures failed to change these rules in both Pennsylvania and both Wisconsin. And so, you know, in a really tight race and if we see a lot of mail in ballots, it could just take a little while.

*<CLIP> SCHMIDT: That window of time between the polls closing and races being called, I think, has shown to be a real vulnerability…*

SEAN: Why is it that they haven't just made it easier to count the ballots early? Is it because, like Wisconsin, Pennsylvania or sort of inconsequential states in these elections?

SARA: Yeah, totally unimportant now.

SEAN: Got it. <snickering>

SARA: No! That's not the issue. The issue is politics.

SEAN: Mmm!

SARA: And the issue is partisanship. I mean, in Wisconsin, there were a lot of conspiracies about how it could kind of subvert the vote somehow to process these ballots early, even though there are plenty of other states that do that and there's no evidence that it subverts the process. In Pennsylvania, it was essentially, you know, partisan gridlock. There were Democrats and Republicans who wanted to get other things out of a bill that would have made this change. And then by the time there was just a clean bill to make this change, allowing early processing for mail in ballots, it just was kind of dead in the water. And so, you know, don't take it out on your local election officials in Pennsylvania and in Wisconsin. It's not their fault. It was the state legislature's fault.

SEAN: So I'm just curious, though. Could we, could we … Let's, let's take a moment here to help people prepare themselves mentally for what could happen in two weeks on November 5th. I mean. How could things play out come November 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th? Give us an idea of, of what the delays might look like and, and where we might be focused.

SCORING <New Tension 08 Infinite Whack a Mole>

SARA: There are so many ways it could play out. I mean, one is the polling could be off and somebody could run away with this across these different battleground states. And maybe it won't be as late of a night as we think it's going to be. So that's certainly a possibility. Another option is that this could be razor-thin in so many of these states that it's just really hard to call any of these really important battleground states on election night or really hard to call several of these important battleground states on election night. And so this becomes, you know, a counting story that stretches for a couple of days. You could also be in a situation, you know, not to, to be too triggering to anyone, but a situation like Florida <laughing> in 2000…

SEAN: Mm.

SARA: …where you have a batch of ballots that is contested. And we've seen kind of lawsuits that are sort of precursors for that.

MINI SCORING BUMP

SARA: We could be in a position where, you know, a state looks one way, like it's trending one way when you go to bed and it looks like it's trending a different direction when you wake up. And a lot of this has to do with how different states count and process batches of ballots. And in some states, counties process batches of ballots differently. So, for instance, in Arizona, election officials have already suggested that right after the polls closed, it might not look great for Republicans because they're going to start releasing the results of the early vote first, and that's likely to trend more Democratic. And then they'll, you know, start releasing what happened in terms of the in-person vote in Arizona. And that could trend more Republican.

*<CLIP> MSNBC: We’re probably gonna be – I would guesstimate, 10 to 13 days out from Election Day til we have those final official results, hopefully much sooner. And if we get em, we’ll get em, we’ll certify them and move on. It’s the shenanigans beyond that that… <fade>*

SARA: In Pennsylvania, you know, part of the reason people got so spun up is because they went to bed in 2020 on election night and it looked like Donald Trump was winning. And then when they woke up, it looked like Joe Biden was winning. And it looked to some people as, you know, like something must have gone wrong. People felt like something was being done to steal Donald Trump's win from him, when in reality it was just more ballots being counted.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: And in the meantime, it sounds like the best move for people is to, you know, hope that we have results on November 5th. But to be prepared for a longer wait and for even the potential for a little bit of drama.

SARA: Yeah. Be prepared. Just be prepared for all the things. You know, be prepared for a longer wait. If it's going to be a couple of days, you know, maybe you don't like just mainline media for four days straight. Like, go outside, have a snack…

SEAN: <laughs>

SARAL …take a walk, pet a dog. Come back. Wait to see if another state's been called like it doesn't mean just because this takes a couple of days that there is some kind of mass-scale voter fraud going on. It doesn't mean machines are flipping votes. It doesn't mean people are throwing away ballots. It just means election workers are still counting the votes.

SEAN: Don't forget to eat food.<laughs>

SARA: Yeah. Eat some snacks, pet a dog. It'll be fine. Pet a cat.

SEAN: <laughs>

SCORING <Pay No Attention to this Picture of Rita Hayworth>   
  
SEAN: Sara Murray. CNN. It’s channel 62 at my mom’s house.

Our program today was produced by Amanda Lewellyn, edited by Matthew Collette, fact checked by Laura Bullard, and mixed by Andrea Kirstinsdottir and Patrick Boyd, who spoke to his family and neighbors around Asheville, North Carolina for us, too. Welcome back, Patrick.

Next week we’re going to Nevada on *Today, Explained*.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]