



Amy Walter on Politics, Money and the Midterms | LTIS Episode 9 | May 8, 2022

TS: This is “Legislatures: The Inside Storey” and I’m your host, Tim Storey, the CEO of the National Conference of State Legislatures. Thank you for being here. Today on the podcast, my guest is Amy Walter, editor and publisher of The Cook Political Report. She took on that role last year after years covering Congress and elections for Cook and many other outlets like the National Journal, ABC News and the PBS NewHour, where she is a regular commentator. She has a long view on issues, candidates, races and how policy gets made in Washington and in the states. We will be talking about all of that today.

Amy Walter, I have been so looking forward to spending time with you today ever since we figured out we would be getting together here and recording this podcast. So, I am very, very grateful for you for making time. Thank you.

AW: Oh this is so fun. We could talk for seven hours.

TS: Well you are an extremely busy person. You got a lot of gigs. I get the sense that every time I turn around, you’ve got something new going on and of course the biggest one is, and we should really start there because it wasn’t so long ago that the venerable ... do I have to say the word venerable ahead of The Cook Political Report? Is that required?

AW: You do. You do. It's actually written into my contracts. Yeah.

TS: The venerable Cook Political Report is now The Cook Political Report with Amy Walter and you are the publisher and editor-in-chief. So, congratulations. When did you, when did that happen? It wasn't so long ago.

AW: Yeah it wasn't that long ago. It was over the summer. So, it was back in early August. Obviously I've been with The Cook Political Report for quite some time. I started way back in 1998. Was there covering the House through 2006, early 2007. And then I went out and served as the editor-in-chief at the Hotline and then went over to ABC News as political director and then as I like to tell everyone like the prodigal daughter, I had to come home again and I came back to The Cook Political Report after the 2012 presidential election. And have been there ever since doing much more of a national focus. And you know Charlie started The Cook Political Report in the '80s so we are over 30 years old. It's quite a remarkable run. He created a model and a brand that a lot of people have tried to copy or emulate, but it is just such a rarity even now to have folks who just want to cover races. We are nonpartisan. We don't take positions on policy. We don't get into advertising. You know, we just like to as Charlie has long said, we don't pick sides. We just don't want to be wrong.

TS: Oh my gosh. I'm going to steal that. We don't pick sides; we just don't want to be wrong. I think you probably just described NCSL by the way. So we share this affinity. I think we also both share, I'll speak for you somewhat, a pretty deep affection for Charlie Cook. He is a special guy and I don't know if he listens to podcasts. I know this is probably his number one on this playlist, but if he did, I would hope he would hear that because boy I sure do love that guy and he has established something that is venerable, but is also kind of an institution in its own way. Thanks for that perfect background because you are somebody who is tremendously respected. I hope – I know you know that, but I'll add my voice to that. I think mainly because you've managed to hang on. It is not easy as we know at NCSL to navigate the hyper-partisanship of the world that we live in, and it's something that's changed. And so you've been very successful with that. And that's why your voice has so much credibility and your perspective is so important.

(TM): 04:01

AW: Thank you. Well it is. You are right. It has gotten to be. Well just covering politics feels so different and you know this too. Even from when I began you know I talk to a lot of young people who come to Washington and they say how can I do what you do. How can I get involved in journalism and covering politics and you know I go back to gosh I don't know if I have the right answer for you because when I started the answer to that

question was pretty simple. Get out of Washington. Go to your local paper or a local paper right. You want to understand politics, go to the Cleveland Plain Dealer. Go to The Denver Post. Go where you are going to learn it from the ground up. That is better training than anything you can do, anything you can do in Washington. And the goal would be you work your way up. One day, maybe you become the political editor or the correspondent for a paper. You come to Washington as that paper's correspondent or politics for Washington. I mean when I started there would be, I don't know. You go to these press conferences on Capitol Hill and you know you would have 40 or 50 local reporters right. Hey you know my name is blah, blah, blah. I'm with the Connecticut Post. I'm here with the Sacramento Bee. None of those folks are around anymore and all politics now has become nationalized.

The rooms are still packed with reporters, but they are all covering process more than they are covering policy. It means that every single outlet there is asking, you know, what do we think this means for the race for speaker. What does this mean about the strategy for the midterms or the shakeup in leadership. The conversation would be a lot more focused on OK, I cover the Northeast or whatever. I want to understand in this bill what is that going to mean for people who live in my region. Not to jump too far ahead but I do think that has been part of the challenge for Democrats this year when we look at how much attention the media puts on the infighting, the intraparty warring with Democrats over legislative agenda, Build Back Better or voting rights or the filibuster. And so what regular people out in the world saw was just utter dysfunction in part because that's really good fodder for the people who cover politics now. And so Democrats are to wring their hands saying I don't understand. We passed all this great stuff earlier in the year right. We got infrastructure done and we got this rescue plan that put trillions of dollars out and stimulus checks. And no one is talking about that in part because you now spent August, September, October, November, December in process land that got augmented by the fact that that is exactly what the national media loves to cover. That's right in their wheelhouse.

TS: I've been thinking about this. What are the incentives right. And I was thinking about this. There seems to be a little bubble of coverage around McConnell and his spat with Florida Senator Scott. The media will chase down AOC and Speaker Pelosi are crosswise and yada, yada, yada. Is it because like they are trying to trend? I feel like now everybody's goal is to trend on Twitter.

AW: You are right that the incentive structure is so much of the problem. Whether it's the internal spats right. Who doesn't like who or the people who are doing absolutely ridiculous things. It's performative. So on the republican side right Madison Cawthorn and the Lauren Boebert and those folks who really are truly in Cawthorn's case have made pretty clear that their job in Washington is to just to communications. They are

not particularly interested in the legislating part so there is tremendous amount of performance that gets rewarded. And it's not just that you trend on Twitter. You raise a ton of money because everybody gets to see this help me take on the fill in the blank boogie person. And if you are cable news and you are desperate for something that people will stay glued to, there is nothing better than personalities and people making ridiculous statements to keep people engaged. You are not going to keep people engaged with a really thoughtful conversation about unemployment insurance.

TS: So why do we have to accept that? You just said that as a declarative statement. You are not going to keep people engaged talking about unemployment insurance, like, and I'm going to say well maybe that's what we have to figure out. Like maybe we have to figure out how to make boring policy a little more interesting because it matters so much more than the antics of players on both sides. Like we got to be really clear this is not a one side thing right. So yeah, I heard you say like you're not going to get people interested in unemployment. You are probably right, but I guess I don't want to give up.

(TM): 09:22

AW: You don't have to and here is the great thing about the explosion of media thanks in large part to what we are doing right now, which is communicating to each other over this machine called the Internet or whatever. Over a machine using the Internet – part of the great thing about it is you have access now to so much more than was ever possible and getting it in a first run way, right. Like I can actually watch a governor give a state of the state response. I don't have to wait for TV to cover it right. They might think it is boring. I want to hear it directly from the governor, I can go and actually find it, click on it and watch it myself. I don't have to have it filtered through the media and there are a tremendous number of sites that do exactly what you are saying, which is I'm going to walk you through a pretty complicated policy, but do it in a way that is accessible to you. Vox media was sort of built on that right. Let's understand "X." The New York Times has a number of podcasts like this, too. Well let's take a really complicated issue, bring people in who have opinions and expertise on it. They may be on opposite sides of it, but we are going to walk you through it and help you understand it. So, it's available.

TS: Well I'll quickly plug something. There is an outfit called Starting Point that's actually Chris Evans, the actor, who is in the Marvel movies. He has done this where they sort of pair two people and one or two things is they don't have any comments on this page and we are actually trying to pair with them like we are going to talk about the issues in states. Abortion is a big issue right with the pending decision on *Roe*. So, you know, they will have people come in and very sort of take on, drain some of the enormous passion.

And I'm talking about OK here are the issues and so I think there are outlets like that that are starting up and maybe if enough flowers bloom, some of them will survive.

AW: I do think it's great, but I have, you know, I have a teenager. The hard thing is to and he loves doing this right. Like I want to go find. Most teenagers do. I want to find stuff that contradicts what my parents tell me or I want to find it myself. Right. And so he will come in and he will just drop some phrase or he will say did you know something something. Where did you get that? Right. So we spend a lot of time. It's always the Internet. And sometimes these are really. He's found some really, really cool commentators, sites that are really thoughtful and are actually factual. And he's found a lot that are right some guy on YouTube who has 10 million followers. Where did he get his information? It's getting harder and harder.

TS: I mean you talked about it there a second ago where like you know we've got this. We are in this wonderful time where you can hear it directly from the sources. It's also a curse right. There is so much volume. We do have to talk about you know your perspective on the American political scene today and again a very thoughtful one. Not the kind of knee jerk who is angry at who this morning. But so, honestly, the mid-term elections, which come around every two years in our system. They are on the horizon. Primaries have already begun, you know. Texas has just held their primaries. What can you tell us about this fall's midterms?

AW: Alright well first of all, I think we have a number of really interesting storylines. If you want to talk about what I think is fun, I know what you think is fun, right, which is there's more than just what happens in November. There are the storylines that happen as we move through these primaries. And so the storyline that is going to get the most attention of course is how are these Trump endorsed candidates doing. The most high profile is Georgia where the former president is still so angry with every statewide elected official in the state of Georgia campaigning against the sitting Republican governor, endorsing former Republican senator who lost in the 2020 election. He is cutting ads for him. He is going to do rallies for him. Doing everything he can to raise money for Perdue. He needs to right in his words just show Brian Kemp that the people of Georgia are so angry that you did not stand up for me and stand up for the people of Georgia and allowed Joe Biden to rig the election. But you know what? Brian Kemp is doing real well actually. He is raising a lot of money. He is still very well liked in the state. The latest polling has him ahead and it's not the only state where he has weighed in right. We've got other gubernatorial races, senate races so that's going to be one storyline.

The other storyline that we are tracking especially at the congressional level is in these very red or very blue states where the primary is basically the general, what kind of

candidates are coming through? Are these the kinds of candidates who they did appeal to the most extreme or they were endorsed by the most extreme? Or they again then we will have the Trump endorsed versus not Trump endorsed. We will also have Justice Democrats right. The more, the Bernie Sanders-AOC wing. They've been getting engaged in some races. What is that makeup? What kinds of people we do know are definitely coming to Washington both their background, their style, what things are they focused on? I think that will be fascinating. We are also going to have to watch these because it's a redistricting year member versus member races which are always uncomfortable for the party right and the caucus. I was somewhere the other day thinking man that just must be so weird to like walk into your caucus meeting knowing the person across the table from you, you're going to be running ads attacking them in a couple of weeks. They are your colleague and your friend, but you are up against each other. So, all of that is going to be really fascinating as we have the runup to the fall.

You know each and every election is unique and it has something either unexpected or something we never have seen before right. I think just at the term of the 21st century, we've had 911. We've had the financial crash. We've had a pandemic. We know have you know this record high inflation. We are having a land war in Europe right now. I mean these are all things that none of us in our lifetimes had ever seen before. They are all unique. Each came. A different president was in place during each one of those events. And yet and yet, there are these sort of constants in every one of these midterms. These sort of fundamentals that help us to make each one of these midterms while they are unique, they all have some the same thing in common. It's a referendum on the sitting president. Referendum on the party that's in power. And when people are in a bad mood or when things aren't going well, they take it out on that president. They take it out on that party. Every single one of the last four midterm elections you had a president, right, sitting somewhere in the 40%-45% job approval rate. You had independents really overwhelmingly disappointed with the sitting president in every one of those elections. You had one party that had total control of Washington. Well except 2014. They didn't, but they had the Senate control. History they say doesn't repeat itself, but it does rhyme. And this feels very much like '06, '10 and '18 where you come into an election with total power, but the headwinds, the mood of the electorate is just so miasmal.

(TM): 17:14

TS: I hear you, Amy, and I was thinking about that. That like how preposterous it is to try to speculate about what the mood will be in October of this year and November. And as well as will anything be resolved with the war in Ukraine and you know and that's on people. People are riveted to the, I mean I am. I am sort of obsessive about it and I know a lot of people seem to be. Now will that sustain itself? Probably not. But you know

what will be driving it. So, I feel like it's. Man, it feels like there is a lot of uncertainties to me. And then I know and you know that for the last 30 midterms back to the 1900s, the turn of the 20th century, ahm, the party in the White House wins or loses seats in legislatures 28 out of 30 times. So that is just as consistent of a trend as there is in all of political world and it is very similar for the U.S. Congress.

AW: There is a reason for that. It's not that that's a random happenstance. And look in the times that it hasn't happened at least at the federal level, there were unique events would you say oh yeah 911.

TS: And the Great Depression within the legislatures. It's '22 and 2002 right. So, it's.

AW: No, no, no. But's it happened right and then '98 was the one other. In those cases, at least in the '98 and 2001, 2002, you had a president who had a 60% approval rating or higher. It wasn't just that things were chaotic or uncertain because again if you had said to me, gosh the president of the United States is going to be impeached and yet, he still will have a 60% approval rating right. That seems like those two things don't, can't possibly coexist, but the economy was in a really good place and people were not convinced that the thing that Clinton was being impeached for was all that impeachable right. And so it backfired on Republicans. But mostly I think, Tim, if you just try to figure between now and November, there are a million twists and turns that can happen. And yet, I just keep looking at as I said, I just look at like four or five fundamental pieces of information, sort of pillars, to help guide me. And one is the president's job approval rating. The second is enthusiasm right. And we know the party in power, they usually, their voters are usually not as energized to go out and vote as the out party. We are seeing that show up in polling and in actual turnout results and elections that have happened. I look at job approval rating among independent voters because they clearly are the ones that are the folk run right which way they go especially if they break decidedly.

And then in terms of the mood, if it is true that inflation is here to stay at least through the end of the year. Now, it may not be as high as it is right now. October hopefully we are not still looking at \$5 a gallon of gas or whatever it is out in your part of the country, but we will still be in it. We will still be in a time of incredible disruption for the economy and for something that really hits people every day right. It's not one of those like theoretical things about. Even if it's the stock market isn't doing particularly well or, you know, the job market is sluggish or housing starts are sluggish or it's too hot, too cold. But this, man, every time you go to the grocery store. Every time you go out to dinner. Every time you fill up your tank. It's just like err right. It hits you.

TS: And that's tough to overcome. What I didn't hear you say is the fundraising thing. I mean does that matter as much as it used to?

AW: It's so funny you asked that because there was a time when I would. I would be obsessed about how much money are the campaign committees raising? Whose got what money? Now the money is coming from so many different places right. There are people who are raising it online. There are it feels like if you go through and you look at the number of ads run in especially a statewide race, look at who has sponsored that ad. Very few of them say the name of the candidate right. It's not Amy I'm Amy Walter. I approve this message. It's like.

TS: Can you quantify that or it's just like what's your gut, now does your gut quantify that? Is it like X percent candidate?

AW: You know some people have. I wish I had that. There is a great. There are two. The Wesleyan Media Project does a great job of looking at that. But the point being even if you are a Senate candidate. This is especially true in Senate and House races, but you know maybe you haven't raised a ton of money right. And again, this used to be a really big problem in the pre-super PAC days where you kind of limp into a general election. You don't have a whole lot of money. That gives your opponent plenty of time to in that period where you as a guy or woman who made it through a bruising primary has to go quickly and try to raise as much money as possible. Your opponent uses that time to define the race and define you. Now most of these committees or super PAC's, they are ready and ready to go right. So as soon as the primary is over, we pivot too putting a whole bunch of stuff on air to make sure that our candidate isn't behind the eight ball.

I do think fundraising becomes critically important as you know. It still is cheaper to buy advertising as a candidate than as an outside group. So individual candidate fundraising. I think this is especially true at the house level becomes really important. And I also think it is one of those things that helps us to gauge enthusiasm. If what we are seeing, and will I think by the end of the summer we will have a really good sense of this or maybe the June filings. If you start to see candidates because the enthusiasm right now on the Republican side so in this case Republican candidates just raising money hand over fist right. They are just raising it all online and that's going to tell you something about just how much more engaged Republican voters are likely to be as well.

TS: There was a really interesting story this past week about a state legislator who is Republican in this case, but it could be a Democrat, in a state who is on the more sort of bomb thrower extreme end of their caucus who had raised \$2 million dollars. I mean this is someone who is not in the caucus leadership. He is not the speaker of the House, Senate president. In a state legislative district who raised \$2 million dollars because they

have a national platform as a very loud voice. ... Back to what you said earlier, boy does that change the dynamics. You know the party leadership in this case had raised like \$500,000 and one of their members with a national platform because they trend on Twitter had this tremendous war chest.

AW: You know imagine how hard it is to govern in that era. I mean again coming in in the '90s, the leadership in the house especially it kept people in line by saying if you don't do this, you are going to be off this committee and this committee is the opportunity for you to meet donors and have access to right blah, blah, blah or I will introduce you to donors or. I remember being at--this was before McCain-Feingold, which cut off the soft money access from the parties to be able to just write these checks directly to candidates. I think it was at the DSCC, so the Democratic Senate Committee was upset at a candidate and, you know how, they were running their campaign said something to him like this isn't your seat to win or lose. It's our seat. This is our seat. We basically have paid for it. You are going to listen to us. Now the candidates are like I don't need you. I can go find my own money. And I got a, I know, this guy who knows another guy and they are putting millions of dollars in a super PAC and that's going to come. You know this because you are seeing it at the state legislative level too. It just, the parties have become weaker and weaker.

TS: If you talk to the speakers of the Houses and the Senate presidents and the leaders out there, you know they will say their biggest challenge. I mean they won't say it in front of a microphone, but they will tell you their biggest challenge is within their own caucuses you know these problem children who now have so much more tools at their disposal to sew disruption and to prevent you know the sort of governing and sound policymaking. You know I'm fond of saying that you know legislators pass over twenty thousand pieces of legislation every year on the stuff that matters to people education and all of this and of course it gets the lightning rod stuff gets a lot of attention. But it's mostly just trying to solve problems in states and but it's a lot more difficult to focus on that when you've got rogue elements who are within your own caucus who are difficult in the room, but also increasingly more powerful outside the room and just cause you headache after headache after headache. And every time there are 7,383 legislators-- I think I have to say that every podcast. Every day two of them get attention nationally because they do something really dumb, and those people have always existed. I mean legislators have been doing dumb stuff forever. Of course, the vast majority of them are you know solid people and now it gets blown up and it's just a different time obviously.

I will say seriously that one thing about this year is that we will be paying more attention to primaries than I think ever before. And I've seen it at the legislative level. In fact, the Texas primaries were interesting. There was a very big intraparty war at some level.

Maybe war is not the right word. Skirmish. Big skirmish on the Republican side and actually, you know, kind of the insurgent wing did not fair all that well.

AW: You are exactly right. It is so important to keep track of those things because the outsized attention that the insurgency gets does not reflect their actual success right. Now to your point, it doesn't take that many though. If you have and especially in states where you don't have a super majority, so if you have a majority of four or five and you got three insurgents, well that you know.

TS: I could tell you stories Amy. I mean I know you see it at the national level, but I state by state by state, its really one of the maybe the biggest challenge that legislative leaders are dealing with is these extreme voices. And it is again both sides. At the end of the day, they have to govern. That's the only challenge too is that sometimes you are out recruiting candidates and the best candidate may not be the best legislator per say. We talked a little bit about The Cook Political Report with Amy Walter. How has media changed of course we are in the lightening round so you got to you know do this is 27 seconds or less. But ah you know the media landscape and where are you going to take Cook Political Report? I mean it's been what it has for over 30 years so where does it go now?

AW: It's an excellent question and I think we start with an incredible brand. We have such a benefit there. And some of it is making sure that this brand that you know it was built up way back in the '80s, but that it stays relevant as we go through each one of these decades. And it has in large part because of just the success and the respect that Charlie had, but we have a really incredible team that also has been able to sort of spread the gospel if you will of Charlie. I do think that this is especially as our politics continues to be so polarizing that folks are desperate for a voice that is going to come in and say look, we are not picking sides in this thing. I'm not telling you what to think. Sometimes I'm going to give you. You can ask me what I think is going to happen and you may not like the answer, but my job isn't to make you feel better or worse. I'm not here also if I'm delivering you news that is going to be bad, I'm not there to as the kids would say dunk on you about it. You need and want to understand our politics, the climate, what is happening again at the federal level and gubernatorial level in terms of elections and the trends that go along with those. We are your resource.

TS: I can't tell you how many times I saw an article from Charlie, and I would read it and think why is no one saying this. Like he nailed and I just think there is a huge place for that voice of. You don't have to be contrary per say, but you know when the herd is going somewhere, there are these hyper credible people and I think you are kind of in that space that are saying wait a minute. There is something else going on over here, so

you guys are really good at that. And I know you will continue that tradition. Thank you very much Amy. Really terrific. Thank you.

AW: It was a lot of fun. We will talk soon.

TS: My guest was Amy Walter, editor and publisher of Cook Political Report with Amy Walter. Thanks for listening to “Legislatures: The Inside Storey.” I’m your host Tim Storey with NCSL, the National Conference of State Legislatures. Go to NCSL.org if you’d like to listen to that episode again. We are going to tap into the wealth of resources we have for lawmakers and legislative staff on all the major issues in the states and territories.

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