REID EPSTEIN'S ECONOMIC POLLING ANXIETY

NYT's Reid Epstein, who fairly routinely says things that make it clear he misunderstands what he's watching, recently substantiated a whine that Kamala Harris doesn't do enough interviews by claiming that Trump faces challenging questions at those things he labels press conferences.

> Mr. Trump has, however, held three recent televised news conferences with the mainstream reporters covering his campaign, who posed challenging questions on numerous fronts.

Today, Epstein's out with a complaint that Kamala Harris' interview with Stephanie Ruhle was a softball interview with a friendly interviewer. His first piece of evidence to substantiate his complaint is that rather than answering a question about why Trump polls better than her on the economy, Harris instead, "blasted Mr. Trump's record."

> The MSNBC host's second was about why voters tend to tell pollsters that Mr. Trump is better equipped to handle the economy.
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> Ms. Harris responded to the fairly basic and predictable questions with roundabout responses that did not provide a substantive answer.
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> Instead of offering any explanation for why Mr. Trump polls better on the economy — a matter that has vexed Democrats as President Biden has overseen a steadily improving economy — Ms. Harris instead blasted Mr. Trump's record. She blamed him for a loss of manufacturing and autoworker jobs and

> said his tariff proposals would serve as
> an added sales tax on American
> consumers.

It *was* a friendly interview! But it was also more substantive than the press conferences that Epstein has fooled himself into believing presented challenging questions. And her assertions were factually correct (though WaPo says she misstated the manufacturing job loss).

For example, here's the answer he's complaining about:

> RUHLE: But, still, polling shows that more — most likely voters still think Donald Trump is better to handle the economy. Why do you think that is?
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> HARRIS: Well, here's what I know in terms of the facts.
>
> Donald Trump left us with the worst economy since the Great Depression, when you look at, for example, the employment numbers.
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> RUHLE: It was during COVID, and employment was so high because we shut down the government, we shut down the country.
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> HARRIS: Even before the pandemic, he lost manufacturing jobs, by most people's estimates, at least 200,000. He lost manufacturing plants. Ask the autoworkers how he lost auto plants.
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> We have grown over 20 new auto plants. He has an agenda. Let's just deal with it right now going forward, not to mention what happened in the past.
>
> He has an agenda that would include making it more difficult for workers to earn overtime, an agenda that would include cutting off access to small business loans for small businesses, an agenda that includes tariffs to the

> point that the average working person will spend 20 percent more on everyday necessities and an estimated $4,000 more a year on those everyday necessities, to the point that top economists in our country, from Nobel laureates, to people at Moody's and Goldman Sachs, have compared my plan with his and said my plan would grow the economy.
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> His would shrink the economy. Some of them have actually assessed that his plan would increase inflation and invite a recession by the middle of next year. So, the facts remain that Donald Trump has a history of taking care of very rich people.
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> And I'm not mad at anybody for being rich, but they should pay their fair share — but tax cuts for the billionaires and the top corporations in our country, and then not really paying much attention to middle-class families. My perspective on the economy is, when you grow the middle class, America's economy is stronger.
>
> And there's empirical evidence to prove my point correct.

Harris listed:

- The decline of manufacturing jobs under Trump
- The historic rise of manufacturing jobs under Joe Biden
- Biden's investment in the auto industry
- Several Project 2025 policies that would hurt small businesses
- Trump's proposed tariffs,

> which even GOP economists
> loathe
> - Her plan to make taxes more
>   fair

Ruhle asked a horserace question (and challenged
Harris on the cause of the collapse of the
economy under Trump), and Harris responded by
listing a bunch of policies — those enacted
under Biden, those she plans to do if elected,
and those Trump has proposed — distinguishing
her from Trump.

Later in the interview, she would observe that
Trump is just not very serious on policy issues,
in the kind of comment that drives Trump nuts
and reassures certain kinds of voters who value
overt strength. (I keep wondering whether I'm
allowed to say Madam Vice President is dick-
wagging, but this is language that resonates
with a certain kind of often male voter.)

> I — frankly, I'm going to — and I say
> this in all sincerity. He's just not
> very serious about how he thinks about
> some of these issues. And one must be
> serious and have a plan, and a real
> plan, that's not just about some talking
> point ending in an exclamation at a
> political rally, but actually putting
> the thought into, what will be the
> return on the investment, what will be
> the economic impact on everyday people?

Never mind that Harris made a bunch of factual
claims that almost never get covered at NYT. In
an interview in Pittsburgh, she addressed
manufacturing (and her opposition to Nippon
Steel buying the local plant in Pittsburgh).
That's transparently obvious smart politics.

She spoke to voters, not Reid Epstein. She told
a story *about* the economy, and poor Epstein is
sad she didn't tell a story *about polling*. She
did what good politicians do: Answer the
question that voters care about, not the one

that horserace journalists care about.

Meanwhile, Epstein's colleague Michael Gold wrote another of his sanewashing posts on Trump the other day, with the headline, "Trump Pitches 'New American Industrialism' and Luring Foreign Manufacturing."

Don't get me wrong: How voters view Harris on the economy is important. How voters view a candidate on their most important issue often predicts the winner. As Gallup explained in a piece arguing that most measures of the election favor Republicans, the party that does better on the issue voters view as most important almost always wins the election.

> This measure has been highly predictive of election outcomes in Gallup trends dating back to 1948. The party rated as better at handling the most important problem has won all but three presidential elections since that year. The question was not asked in 2000, and the two parties tied in 1980, when inflation was the top issue. The only time the measure was out of sync with the outcome was in 1948, when Americans believed the Republican Party was better able to handle the most important problem (international issues) but returned Democratic incumbent Harry Truman to office.

Gallup rolled this out with a recent poll showing that the economy remains the most important issue — though their poll results are suspect, given that just 4% of respondents said abortion was their most important issue (it's probably twice that).

Percentage of Americans Mentioning Economic Issues as the Nation's Most Important Problem
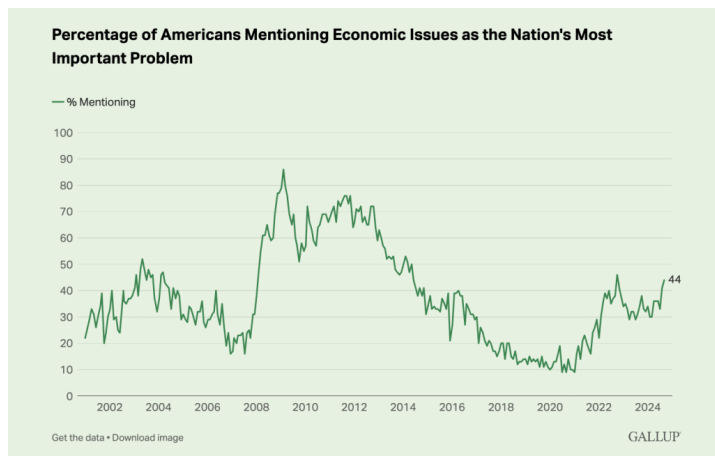
At the end, Gallup suggests that voters will figure out they don't like Democrats. Gallup doesn't consider that maybe its poll shows way too many voters rate immigration most important and far too few rate abortion as such.

> Nevertheless, the two major party presidential candidates have similar favorable ratings in Gallup's September poll, echoing presidential preference polls that suggest a neck-and-neck race between Trump and Harris.
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> It is possible that Americans' voter preferences may align better with their views of the state of the nation between now and Election Day. Trump led in most presidential preference polls this summer when Biden was the presumptive Democratic nominee and Americans' unhappiness was focused on the incumbent president. The election results will reveal the extent to which Harris, the incumbent vice president, is saddled with Americans' frustrations with the current administration or is able to rise above those.

That is, Gallup is sure the voters are wrong, not its own polling.

This is probably a good time to recommend Rick Perlstein's review of W. Joseph Campbell's *Lost in a Gallup: Polling Failure in U.S. Presidential Elections*, which describes how

serially unreliable presidential polling is.

But back to Reid Epstein, who judges Vice President Harris as a weak candidate because she's speaking to voters, not Reid Epstein.

Polls, from all pollsters, generally show this to be a tight race, with results varying from Trump leading by one to Harris leading by seven.

Where there's an interesting variation is on just this issue: how voters say the two candidates are doing on the economy.

NYT's own poll — which is one of two most pessimistic for Harris — shows a significant 13% gap, about where things stood this summer.

The New York Times

The economy	U.S. LIKELY ELECTORATE	MEN	WOMEN
Kamala Harris	41%	34%	47%
Donald Trump	54%	60%	49%
[VOL] Don't know/Refused	5%	5%	4%

But as WaPo reported yesterday, *other* polls show something different going on: They show that Harris is cutting into Trump's lead on the economy.

> Although voters still favor former president Donald Trump over Harris on handling the economy, his advantage has dropped dramatically in recent weeks. Trump now averages a six-percentage-point edge on the economy, compared with a 12-point lead against President Joe Biden earlier this year, according to an analysis of five polls that measured voters' opinions before and after Biden dropped out.
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> A Fox News poll this month, for example, found that 51 percent of registered voters favor Trump on the economy, compared with 46 percent who favor

> Harris. That's compared with a 15-point advantage Trump had over Biden in March. Other recent polls — by ABC-Ipsos, NPR-PBS NewsHour-Marist, USA Today-Suffolk University and Quinnipiac University — show similar shifts.

WaPo credits overall economic trends and Kamala's fresh face on these issues.

> Underlying that sea change, analysts say, is the fact that Americans are feeling better about the economy. Prices are stabilizing, interest rates are coming down and wages are rising faster than inflation. At the same time, voters seem to view Harris as a clean slate, unburdened by the rapid run-up in prices that has plagued Biden for much of his presidency.
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> Plus, political strategists say, she has struck a decidedly different tone on the issue. Unlike Biden, who spent a lot of time trying to convince Americans that the underlying economy was great, Harris has come across as more sympathetic to their everyday struggles. Her economic policies — including a slate of new proposals rolling out this week — have focused on issues important to middle-class voters, including affordable health care, housing and childcare. Harris is scheduled to speak on the economy Wednesday in Pittsburgh.
>
> "She's been very aggressive about laying out specifics, and that's what people want," said Celinda Lake, a Democratic pollster. "It also helps that she's a new face with a new set of life experiences, so people don't assume her policies will be the same as Biden's. And on top of that, inflation is abating. The fact that prices have stabilized and seem more predictable — that goes a long way."

I suspect that it's not just that Harris has
approached this differently, it's also that her
own approval ratings have increased. Voters'
"feels" about Harris have dramatically improved,
and as a result, they trust the facts she's
providing about the economy.

Those may be related. That is, voters may like
her economic empathy, they may like her emphasis
on being raised middle class that jaded
reporters like Epstein find shallow.

Whatever it is, a number of polls are showing
two key trends: Harris' approvals are going up,
dramatically (Biden's are inching up), and more
voters are beginning to prefer her on the
economy.

They may well be showing that Harris' strategy,
including a media strategy that speaks to voters
not horserace journalists, that emphasizes both
her economic empathy and her wonkiness, is
working — that no matter how much Epstein
whines, Harris has a better handle on what to do
about polls showing voters prefer Trump by
shrinking margins on the economy than Epstein
does.

It's like the NYT story on Tim Walz' trip to
Erie, a swing county in the most important
state, which twice bitched that Walz didn't
answer questions about a stupid Trump attack,
that some of Walz' cousins prefer Trump.

> Mr. Walz also frustrated a handful of
> reporters as he refused to answer
> shouted questions.
>
> [snip]
>
> Mr. Walz ignored shouted questions from
> reporters about news articles that
> surfaced Wednesday over his own distant
> Republican relatives pledging to vote
> for Mr. Trump. But at his rally in Erie,
> he seemed to nod at those reports as he
> tied Mr. Trump to a set of conservative
> policies he described as harmful to
> democracy, women, workers and the middle

> class.
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> "So you tell your relatives because, look, we all got them — we know we got to keep talking to them — he said what he would do," Mr. Walz said of Mr. Trump. "And I believe him."

Epstein claims to care about voters' opinion on the economy, but he's so wrapped up in making himself the story that he ignored Harris' effort — an effort that seems to be having some effect — moving voters' opinion about the economy.

Harris is telling the story that Epstein refuses to.

That is, *she's* doing her job.

This really does seem to be the problem with the NYT this year — and by no means just with Epstein. NYT wants the story to validate the horserace as horserace, it wants to validate a self-imagined measure of their own savviness, rather than focus on the voters' needs and preferences. Epstein quite literally complained that Harris used her opportunity to do something about her (shrinking) deficit in polling on the economy, rather than indulging his needs by emphasizing it.

As Harris says, her mother taught her never to let others tell her who she is, but to show people who she is.

Reid Epstein, whom the NYT pays to cover Harris' campaign full time, apparently missed that bit.