

CNN's *The Arena with Kasie Hunt*

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4:07:22 a.m.

3 minutes

KASIE HUNT: Jodi Kantor, I am so grateful to have you in *The Arena*. It's wonderful to have you here. I want to start with the big picture on this, right? I mean, Jeff dug into the details, the landscape of the race. But you did so much groundbreaking reporting around the MeToo movement. And we have seen our politics evolve in dramatic ways over the last decade. And the fact that — just to stick about the electorate makeup is a fascinating one. And I'm sure Kristen can speak to that, but they could obviously produce that picture of Graham Platner with a whole bunch of women behind him in the wake of these *New York Times* headlines. What does it say about our political moment that voters are willing to overlook the things they're willing to overlook here?

JODI KANTOR: Well, let's talk about what they may or may not be willing to overlook the accusations against Graham Platner are not classic MeToo accusations. They're not about a boss and a young female employee being subjected to sexual advances. They're — they were mostly made in the context of consensual relationships. There are these, like, very sensational texts about sex. There are allegations from former girlfriends that are not — the way my colleagues reported them were not like classic abuse allegations. They were mostly like being his boyfriend gave me a view into him and I did not like what I saw. His character was scary. He had this Nazi tattoo. Et cetera. There was one allegation of crossing a line physically, but I think that means that these are pretty different accusations than, say, the one that — the ones that President Trump faced. And, of course, in the *Access Hollywood* tape, President Trump bragged about grabbing women against their will. And so I think it speaks to the kind of confusion of the long post MeToo moment in which, like, gender related accusations get bundled together. But they're actually very different.

HUNT: Kristen Soltis Anderson yeah, jump in.

KRISTEN SOLTIS ANDERSON: Yeah. You know, one of the things that Graham Platner said in his comments that you showed earlier in the show was they want to make this just about one moment. But what I'm struck by is it's not just about one moment with him. It's not just about one time where he grabbed someone's wrist. It's about a time where, as your colleagues reported, he took her and he put her in a room and he closed the door, allegedly, and would not let her out. It's about the texts to — up to six other women who are not his wife. So, the problem for Graham Platner is that it's not just one thing. And when he says it's not about me, he's really hoping that it's not about him. He's really hoping that the midterm is about Donald Trump, and he may get his wish, ultimately. But I feel like there's a chance that Democrats look back at a moment like this, where they had someone run against essentially nobody strong in that primary — like, the sitting governor backed out — are they leaving seats on the table in a very favorable environment by choosing candidates who simply are not the A-Team?

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4:11:50 p.m.

4 minutes and 4 seconds

XOCHITL HINOJOSA: So, Graham Platner doesn't mean sort of this establishment, to be honest with you. He's been running a campaign that has been sort of anti-establishment. He's anti-incumbent. He is someone who knows Maine. He is someone who is saying, listen, I'm a normal person. I'm not your typical politician. And to be honest with you, I don't think it really gets him anything for Democratic leaders in Washington to be defending him. So, why they're defending him? I'm actually not sure. One warning I have for Democrats is women is what makes up the vast majority or majority of the electorate that will be — that will give us the senate, that will give us the House. And we need women in order to win in 2028. If you are eyeing a run for presidency and you are going out there and campaigning for Graham Platner, I would say that is pretty bad advice that you have been given right now, because, at some point, you yourself will be needed. You need to make the case to women directly. Let Graham Platner do his thing in Maine. Let him raise the money. Let him tell it. You know, go ahead and hit and hit Collins, etc. But I don't think that national Democrats need to go out there on a limb for him at this point, knowing that there could potentially be something more that comes out. Fingers crossed. Everybody's holding their breath in Washington that doesn't happen. But we don't know for sure.

PETER MEIJER: Well, the idea too, that — “well, he's — he's — he's taking responsibility for his actions, he's transformed.” I mean, the allegations of texting multiple women while he's in a relationship and cheating on his wife — I mean, those are within the last year. His Kik profile is still active. He's changed the profile picture. But this isn't, “oh, this was 15 years ago. I was going through a rough patch.” And by the way, as a military veteran, I really resent him using post-traumatic stress as an excuse for things that are just vile behavior. Like you — yes, sure, you were in a dark time. You were getting drunk. But the idea, and I've heard this repeated by some elected officials too that, ‘oh, well, you know, he's like any other military veteran., No. Absolutely not. I — that is not reflective of the veterans community. That's not reflective of people I know. And that idea that there's a conflation. And then that's a reason to excuse vile behavior. It's disgusting.

HUNT: Congressman, you also have some experience with how voters have responded in some of these instances, things they're willing to — to overlook and not, um, do you think do you see any parallels here between the President who seems impervious to the laws, the rules of political gravity, and a candidate like Graham Platner? I mean, are we going to start to see more people who don't have to follow these rules in the wake of Donald Trump? Because we haven't really — that's the thing we haven't really seen yet, right? Donald Trump broke all the rules in the norms. We haven't seen a series of consistent examples where other people are able to do the same thing.

MEIJER: And you've seen a lot of Republicans who say, “oh, well, Trump can do this and he can get away with it. So — so can I?” No, he's Teflon Don. This guy is a unitary, standalone figure. The political laws of gravity do not apply to him. They apply to a lot of folks who want to be like him. And those folks end up vastly underperforming him in the polls. And I think, yes,

absolutely, there's an anti-incumbent, there's an anti-establishment sentiment, and that's an easy thing to play up. It's also an easy thing, as you've seen with his talk about, you know, Epstein class and that it's an easy thing to start to slide in from anti-establishment to anti-Semitic and go down a very dark rabbit hole of conspiracies. I guarantee you watch for when the next shoe drops, who he starts to blame, and how dark this campaign gets.

HINOJOSA: Well, the more he's talking about himself and less talking and not talking about Collins and the economy and the way that people are feeling right now is a loser for him. Like it is not great if he is out there defending this every day and not getting a message out about how he's going to help the American people or people in Maine.

HUNT: Right. Well, and there's, Xochitl, correct me if I'm wrong here, but there's also can be a general feeling — in an environment is bad for Republicans as this one that just, you know, a generic — a Democrat whose name you have no idea, you've never heard it before is the best plan.

HINOJOSA: Yeah. I mean, yeah, that's that. Yes.

[LAUGHTER]

MEIJER: Below the parapet.

HUNT: Okay. Fair enough.

(...)

4:24:40 p.m.

1 minute and 10 seconds

KANTOR: Well, I was riveted by Maggie and Jonathan's excerpt. Their book is called Regime Change. I think it is going to be a blockbuster. And what was so interesting was that you could really see President Trump losing control of the Epstein story, paragraph by paragraph, as they give this internal account of the Trump team trying to deal with it. And part of what is so fascinating about it is that, listen, we're living through a presidentially led backlash to Me Too, right? The President has appointed himself the chief opponent of this movement. But then what happened is it turned out that people really cared about the Epstein files. They were grossed out by the by, the idea of young women being manipulated by the powerful and the wealthy, and part of the lasting power of Me Too, is that there's a lot of empathy, especially for very young victims. And so, to see the President sort of hit by, you could almost call it a backlash to the backlash was really interesting.

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4:26:49 a.m.

1 minute and 51 seconds

MEIJER: Oh, you have you have a charismatic guy who, on the one hand, who's also a sociopathic manipulator. I mean, this gets to the — the veracity of, like, emails, like, “gee, I wonder if this if this guy is totally above board.” No, he's — like — he's trying to blackmail folks to maintain, you know, connections or to do whatever. But I mean, I was just struck, as you mentioned, like, I spent a couple of years hearing this from folks who were trying to allege that, you know, there was some grand pedophile conspiracy cabal across the U.S. government and that's being undermined, and — and Israel is involved and all this and trying to say, “okay, like, come on guys. Like, let's — let's live in reality.” And now, I'm hearing the exact same thing from folks with a inverse political affiliation. And it's just — it is — it is astounding. I mean, the kind of Epstein class descriptor is, you know — I mean, it's Q-Anon, but something fit for daytime TV. But a lot of the folks who are hearing that are hearing a dog whistle, that gets into some parts of the internet. You really don't want to Google some of the terms associated with. And I'm seeing it become this populist catnip. Yeah, there's folks who have tangential associations with Jeffrey Epstein who are, you know, prominent fundraisers or prominent elected officials. I mean, he was texting with —

HUNT: There was an Obama lawyer that lost her private sector job.

MEIJER: — yeah, no. And, and the very fair question is like, what did somebody actually know? Was it that there was a charge that maybe he said, ‘oh, well, it was not a big deal.’ And there have been other prominent folks who've had, you know, charges dismissed, or they — like — I — I'm not going to speak to any of those. All I'm speaking to is where it fits into on the political spectrum. And that seems to use the facts as a basis and then fly a million miles away from them into some very dark places.