Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Event

Federal Statistics for Economic Security

"Strengthening America's Statistical System: A Fireside Chat with Mark Calabria, Chief Statistician of the United States"

DATE

Thursday, November 6, 2025 at 10:00 a.m. ET

FEATURING

Mark A. Calabria

Chief Statistician of the United States, Office of Management and Budget, Executive Office of the President

CSIS EXPERTS

Navin Girishankar

President, Economic Security & Technology Department, CSIS

Transcript By
Superior Transcriptions LLC
www.superiortranscriptions.com

CSIS | CENTER FOR STRATEGIC & INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

Navin Girishankar: Hello, everyone. OK, we're on to the next segment of the morning program. I am absolutely delighted to welcome Dr. Mark Calabria, who is the chief statistician of the United States.

Thank you so much for taking the time. You have an immensely busy schedule, and so lots of questions for you but you've had an extensive parkour across U.S. government; many, many different roles. And in your current role as chief statistician, I wanted to get started by asking you how you would describe the priorities of the administration when it comes to statistics at this moment in time. So –

Mark Calabria: Great. Well, maybe before I describe the priorities let me do the disclaimer of everything I'm going to say is just my own view.

Mr. Girishankar: OK. All right.

Dr. Calabria: So don't take anything in this as – may or may not overlap.

Mr. Girishankar: Understood.

Dr. Calabria: So, first and foremost – and again, some of this was touched on the previous panel – you know, I think what we need to focus on first and foremost is long-term declining response rates. How do you turn that around?

In the short run, we need to focus on the seasonality issues. As you know, a number of series, for instance, may have a five-year cycle, so we still have got 2020 and 2021 entering into the seasonality and I think it's fair to say that 2020 was weird in terms of data seasonality. Now, the plus is eventually that will roll off. But in the – in the next couple years, how do we deal with that seasonality issue before we get back to sort of a steady state? So that's fixable, but I think it's having a really big impact in data today.

And then, of course, data security, which I know we'll talk about, you know, extensively. And this, again, is one of the things that to me keeps me, you know, up and really focused on, on how do we – I mean, again, I think it gets back to response rates in one way in that, you know, people are going to be more reluctant to respond if they don't believe that their data is going to be secure and protected. And of course, I'm, you know, a very big privacy advocate, and I want to make sure that whatever we do collect does not get packed or breached and – or, that people feel confident that the data that they give the government is not going to be shared in ways that they haven't consented to.

Mr. Girishankar: That's a great overview.

Let me try and take a couple of threads here and pull them and see where we go with the conversation. One of the things that we have been talking about – well, first, many of the issues you've raised are not new, right?

Dr. Calabria: Yeah. So I guess I would – you know, early in my career I worked in the Senate Banking Committee, and you know, I would do these, you know, events all the time. And people would ask me, you know: What's the chairman's agenda? What's the committee's agenda? And after about two years, I gave up talking about that and just said, you know, every year the agenda sets itself. The external events, you know, what you – the problems you inherit and the external events really drive your agenda. So I could have a long, drawn-out wish list, but most of that will never get done and the external stuff is really going to drive it. And whoever sits in the seat has pretty much 90 percent of the same problems to fix.

Mr. Girishankar: Right. OK.

One of the things that we have been talking about is how the economy is changing in profound ways. One version of that is the multiple technology revolutions. We're now in the midst of, whatever the root causes of it is, a major upheaval in the trading system. We have some form of economic dislocation over many decades. And, obviously, you, in your previous role as chief economist to Vice President Pence, would have been viewing this from that perch. Now you're sitting here. You have to also think about the hundred or so statistical agencies that are under your purview across the federal government. How is the economy fundamentally changing, in your view? And what pressure does that place on the statistical system that we have inherited?

Dr. Calabria: So, you know, we – you know, just as we moved at one time from predominantly agriculture to manufacturing, we have obviously in the last few decades been moving from a manufacturing to a services base. And obviously, the output – you know, I'm here in Washington; I'll say I don't know how you measure the output of a lobbyist, for instance.

Mr. Girishankar: (Laughs.)

Dr. Calabria: You know? (Laughs.) But you know, we know how to manufacture the output of a – of a plant. And so as we continue that direction of a service-based economy, you know, things like professional services and value-added professional services I think become much more difficult to

truly measure, especially in terms of productivity relative to manufacturing.

But you know, again, we did go through a phase in our history where we transitioned from measuring agriculture output predominantly to measuring factory output, just as we went through a phase where, you know, telephones became a thing and people stopped going as much door and you called people up on the phone. So there's always technological change that goes on in terms of how you reach out to people and how you measure the economy.

To some extent, the statistics are always going to be a lagging indicator as we learn what sectors of the economy look different and how you think about, again, value-added productivity. Those are going to be a really big change as we move. And of course, you have, you know, a much more international-based system, so – and getting back to making sure that these are statistics that relate to policy questions that policymakers have, such as on the trade front, which I know something is a deep interest here. So, again, trying to make sure that you're dealing with that aspect of it.

And then also dealing with, you know, the data technology as well. So, you know, maybe it'll date me to say that there have certainly been points of my career the last probably 10 or so years where I've sort of said can't I just have a mainframe in the basement, why does everything have to be in the cloud, how do I think about the data vulnerability there. Obviously, we're not going back. But again, as you make these tradeoffs between data being more and more accessible, you also make it more and more hackable. So how do you kind of have that balance where you're bringing data security at the same time you are trying to make those datasets – you know, I can remember, you know, doing my dissertation where I went down to the basement and, you know, entered into a terminal and wrote my own code off of big data tape that was running in another room. We don't do that today. You know, you download a dataset and you can run it on your phone, even, sometimes. So, again, how that technology has changed and how that accessibility.

But it gets important the fact that, you know, in a sense we've democratized access to data in a much bigger way, you know? And so, again, I'm always astounded when I go back and read, you know, economics or just, you know, empirical articles from, you know, say, the 1950s, and having to imagine what somebody went through just to run that regression. (Laughs.)

Mr. Girishankar: Yeah. Yeah. Abacus, maybe.

Dr. Calabria: (Laughs.) Abacus, maybe. Right.

Mr. Girishankar: (Laughs.)

So, again, a couple of really interesting points, and I want to just, like, pull them and make sure that we capture them. You talked about how, because the economy is changing, there are new types of data that are needed, because technology is changing and our ability to calculate and be able to capture data and actually process data is changing. That also is another thread of the potential system that is to come or that we would want to develop. Could you linger on that when it comes to AI as well and your perspective on that?

Dr. Calabria: Sure. You know, and first and foremost there's always going to be a question, as you collect more and more new data sources, how representative are they, you know? And I think that's something you could come back to the – to the data. And I have to imagine that when, again, telephones became a thing, you know – (laughs) – decades ago, there was a question probably about how representative are they. And of course, we had these same questions as we transitioned to more and more internet. And again, I remember the debates years ago about, well, can you trust internet surveys? How do you weigh them? And so we're going through these same questions, I think, as you see a broader expansion, but also kind of just thinking about how are you getting at this where you are measuring different segments of the economy and building different relationships with data providers.

So, for instance – and I know my colleagues from the government on a later panel will talk about this, probably – you know, more and more Census and other agencies have built relationships with big data providers. Well, OK, we get that data feed, but how in the world do we know that that's a representative data feed, you know? And so I really think where the government brings the biggest power is thinking about how do you weigh these things. How do you impute missing values? So I think bringing the technical expertise, of which particularly Census but also BEA has a tremendous amount of history on, that's where I think you can really bring the biggest value add.

And so I think it's a great thing that you're seeing more and more data collected. You know, again, I've always throughout my career kind of had the philosophy of looking at the economy and never taking one datapoint too seriously. It's, you know, what does the wealth of information tell me? What are the dozen different datapoints pointing at? And now I imagine – you know, again, I haven't spent as much time on a daily basis. We have other people – CEA and others – who follow the economy more on a daily basis. But you're at the point where, you

know, it's almost too much data to pay attention to, and how do you prioritize and how do you figure out which data sources you trust the most. But it's always going to be a sense of what are the overwhelming mass of the data, what are the direction it tells you. And then how do you filter out which ones you think are less volatile, which are more representative? And I think these are things over time.

So I am excited that there's more and more data out there. You know, I – you know, again, when I was in grad school, the economy was much more theory-based. And now everybody just does big datasets, which, again, help answer important questions.

Mr. Girishankar: Yeah. Well, on that question of data that's being collected, there was the conversation just prior to this one and we've had other ones about the role of the private sector in generating a huge amount of data, and whether that can be used to help tell a rich picture in - as a complement to federal statistics. What's your perspective on that? And is that a – is that a place for more innovation and experimentation?

Dr. Calabria: Well, I think it's worth remembering that there's always been, you know, a partnership. You know, you would – you could go back and see data series in the private sector that started in the '20s and '30s that ultimately got handed over and picked up by the government. Early in my career, you know, I worked at the National Association of Realtors and, you know, worked on the existing home sales series, and it was always kind of flattering to me working on that series to see it appear in Census' statistical abstract, for instance. Part of me would like to bring back those hard statistical abstracts, so I'm going to give Ron a hard time if I can maybe bring some of those back. But that said, you've always kind of had this back and forth where data has entered the public domain, and data has sometimes gone off and been picked up by the private sector.

And of course, you know, it really, more importantly – you know, so, for instance, a number of things I've done throughout my career is sit on advisory committees engaging with Census and other agencies, because at the end of the day, you know, how you ask the question – I mean, you can sit in your room at Census or BEA or another agency and you're thinking about surveying an industry or a public. But until you engage with that industry and public – so, for instance, we did a lot of survey work, again, when I was at Realtors in the '90s, and the first thing we would do was do a focus group – let's pull in a focus group; let's road-test these questions. And so you have to this constant back and forth, you know, with these conversations about: Are you asking the right questions? Are you asking them in such a way that the respondent is going to understand what you're actually asking? And so I think we miss

– that back and forth has always gone on, and that'll continue. And I think that's an important part of it because, again, if you don't actually understand the population that you're trying to survey, you're not going to get good data out of it.

Mr. Girishankar: Yeah. Well, I mean, when I listen to you – which is really fascinating – there's so much continuity across the generations of people who have done this, and you have alluded to that as well, and I think certain disciplines and approaches to doing this that give the statistical system the integrity and the credibility that it has enjoyed and it has had over these years. So when I think of reform and modernization, I just want to make sure as a layperson I'm understanding don't throw out those disciplines but there are these very specific things that can be done to address the problems that –

Dr. Calabria: And we – and we have to recognize, again, on response rates things have just changed. Again, you and I are old enough to remember landline phones. We're, you know – and people would actually answer, and –

Mr. Girishankar: (Laughs.)

Dr. Calabria: And you know, and maybe it's because I'm a resident of the District of Columbia, you know, I think I have been multiple survey respondent on, like, American Community Survey. These things show up at my door. And because I am a longtime user of the system, I always, you know, very diligently answer all the questions and send it back. I think it's, unfortunately, the case that's more and more of an anomaly. And so how do you kind of reinforce, you know, people wanting to respond?

And of course, this is the tension with growing public sector, is that I do think that a lot of people feel over-surveyed, you know? And I don't know what you do about the fact that, you know, we all get mailings from companies where the – you know, they try to make the outside of the envelope look as close to Census as possible and try to make it look a government official, and that confuses people and that overwhelms them. So I do think on one hand we over-survey, and I mean that private/public. And so – and of course, as you know, we've longtime had rules in place that when the decennial is in the field other surveys are not, so that we aren't polluting the data or over-collecting that. But we don't have any control of the private sector on that. And so I do think we have to recognize that can we find other ways – and this is the long-running conversation on more reliance on administrative data, because that data is already collected and therefore you aren't over-surveying anybody more than they are otherwise – but also how do you create incentives, and how do you create trust, and how do you create a sense of people feeling like the data is being collected on their behalf.

And I think that a lot of the public just don't necessarily see the value of the data. And again, I spent eight years on Capitol Hill, and I think it's fair to say that the average member of Congress doesn't see a lot of value in the data. Until you change that, you're not really going to change the funding conversation.

Mr. Girishankar: And what – and what would you – what would you like to see happen in terms of communicating and sensitizing the public to that – to the importance of that?

Dr. Calabria: Maybe this'll sound surprising given some polarizing political times we may live in, but you know, I think a lot of political debates are fundamentally not philosophical but empirical, you know? And you know, maybe you can take – you know, I've spent a lot of my time in the financial services space, the banking space. And so you think about the – you know, the conversation in monetary policy about hawks and doves is really just a conversation about what's the slope of your reaction curve. What's the slope of the Phillips curve you're operating off of? And if somebody is hawkish, they've got a different slope than this one. So it's really the difference between this is fundamentally an empirical question of what do you think these responses are.

Or, you know, I spent a lot of my career working in housing. I think we can bring a lot of data to bear, and have brought a lot of data to bear, to say what is the impact of rent control on the housing market. And so, fundamentally, how do we try to get people to understand that a lot of these questions are not a challenge to your core beliefs; they're really a challenge to what are the empirical relationships behind how the world works.

And of course, I think you need to get back to a fundamental belief – and I'll say this quite sincerely – I start out with the premise of half of what I think I know is probably wrong. And then how do I set up a mechanism to find data to convince me which half is which? Because I don't know which half. And I think getting people to think in those terms, to think about I want to see good data because it helps me understand what I know and what I don't know. And of course, I think the fundamental problem in Washington is, you know, we're a confirmation-bias town, not a falsification town, you know?

Mr. Girishankar: (Laughs.)

Dr. Calabria: And how do you change that dialogue?

Mr. Girishankar: Yeah. We've touched on a number of issues around the statistical system. There's one that you alluded to – and you know, you alluded to our age. (Laughter.)

Dr. Calabria: No, maybe making –

Mr. Girishankar: So when you were a young man – I know. When you were a young man and got started –

Dr. Calabria: I'm assuming a very large standard deviation around – (laughter) –

Mr. Girishankar: You're still youngish. (Laughs.) But when you were very young and you started out in this field – and you were passionate about it; obviously, you wouldn't be spending that much time doing the laborious work it must have been like in those days. I'm thinking about the next gen of statisticians and people who will work in the system, the statistical system that you oversee. How do you – how do you excite people, that next gen, to come into this line of work? Particularly because there has been some tumult and change around – let's just mention it – DOGE and, you know, government – and government institutions, public-sector reform.

Dr. Calabria: So it's a great question. And in the interest of some degree of modesty, let me say, you know, I really think of myself in terms of the statistical system as more a tourist than a permanent resident, to be – to be frank. I mean, I've done a lot of policy. I've gone back and forth, but not spent my entire career.

You know, what I would say that gets people excited about data are that there are big questions you can answer, and how do you help people answer those questions? And it gets back to my earlier point about a recognition that a lot of the big questions are fundamentally empirical, you know? And this isn't something that you can deduce purely from theory or some, you know, philosophy, although I do want to emphasize that you certainly have to start with a theory of what you're trying to observe to interpret the data. But you know, again, it's been interesting to me as an economist watching the change in the field where, you know, when I was in grad school, again, like you know, game theory and – very theoretical was what was taught. And you've just seen the availability of data switch the profession to being so empirical, and I think that's largely been a good thing because it's allowed us to focus on practical questions. You know, can we get answers to this?

And I think that's what excites people because, you know, I guess I'll put it this way: I don't look fondly on early in my career the eight-hour days of going through SAS code and trying to figure out where the comma

was, where I should have put a semicolon. (Laughter.) I don't look back on that fondly. I'm glad I did it. It makes me – appreciation. You know, I also had the appreciation I got to know Ron in the '90s when I spent a year at the Center for Economic Studies at the – at the Census Bureau. And you know, when you come through an econ graduate program you're kind of taught everything is – you know, Census is gold standard, everything's perfect. And then you get into the actual data and you see how much is imputed and you see, you know, our – you know, I remember I was working on a working paper, and one of the great things about being a researcher at Census is you have ready access to the people who run the programs. So I – you know, I was working on a paper on self-employment over the business cycle. I thought I found a really cool finding, and when I was talking to some people who maintained the data they're like, oh, we changed our matching routine between these years. And my result was completely an artifact of the change in the matching routine, so it was a little disappointing. But if I hadn't been there to engage with the people who put the data together, I never would have known that. But getting people excited about there are questions you can answer I think fundamentally is what's going to get support for the data.

And again, I think that gets back to my point about policymakers. You have to get policymakers excited about there are answers to some of your questions. And so some of this is, again, my earlier quip about changing this culture away from a confirmation-bias culture to a how do I really test what I know. I want to solve problem X – housing affordability, poverty. How do I set up a theory and how do I test that theory? And how do you get people into that mindset? So, again, I think we need to really kind of encourage people that there are ways to find answers to many of these tough questions.

Mr. Girishankar: Yeah. That's great.

Let me shift gears for a second. You know, I've heard you talk about trust and the importance of trust in the system. I look at it in two ways, so let's maybe take up those two things. One is privacy. Shed some light on how you think about that? You alluded to that at the beginning. And then I have another trust question to ask you.

Dr. Calabria: Yeah. You know, and people rightly, I think, have an expectation that if they share their data – and it's in a situation – I'll say this on the side. One of my other jobs I'm doing now, I guess we didn't mention it at the beginning. The chief statistician is one of my three jobs I'm currently working –

Mr. Girishankar: Oh, OK. Yes.

Dr. Calabria: – which I guess is the normal now in Washington, is to have multiple jobs. The other thing I spend most of my day at is working at the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau on an open banking – open data rule that we're engaging in. And when people give their account data to a bank, they want that protected. When you give your data to the government in a survey or when you pay your taxes, you want that data protected.

Now, A, I think I have a little bit of unique vantage given that all of my OPM data was hacked by China, so I have no privacy. Probably not the only one in the room who's experienced that. But how do you make sure that when you are collecting the data, you know, what's being shared between agencies – so a really good example of this is, you know, the Census Bureau and BEA have worked out a relationship with data sharing with IRS. BLS has not. And obviously, IRS brings very legitimate concerns that if we share this tax data with other agencies how are we confident that it's protected. And that's a very legitimate concern, but how do you make sure that other agencies are creating those data standards.

And of course, you've seen – and I do think that dealing with the issue of data security – now, part of this as well is also taking a perspective which I know researchers might not love: Let's not ask sensitive private questions unless we need to. So the first question for data privacy should be: Do we need to ask this question? Do we need to collect data on this issue? And I think that we don't do that enough. There is a sense of all – more data is better. There's certainly lots of things about myself that I don't want the government to have in a database. I suspect that's true for most of us. So that has to be, to me, the first threshold: Should we be collecting this?

And of course, I first of all channel my time from the Hill and remind myself, you know, Congress did not create these statistical programs for the enjoyment purely of researchers; they created them for statutory purposes. So, first and foremost, what are the data we need to collect to meet the statutory purposes the Congress has laid out? And how do we do that in a way where we protect the citizens and their information?

So, A, what are you collecting? B, how are you storing it? C, how are you sharing it? And those are all important qualifications.

And again, we've – you know, it's interesting because across fields, whether it's the financial services or whether it's HIPAA and health care, we create all these frameworks on how the private sector shares your

personal data. I'm not convinced that we, the government, live up to those same standards on a daily basis that we expect of the private sector. And so part of my agenda is how do we get ourselves there, where we can say that the federal government is first in class in protecting your data.

Mr. Girishankar: How far are we from that?

Dr. Calabria: Well, I mean, you know, let's say on a road one to a hundred, maybe we're about 60, maybe. So, again, you know, but you're – this is quantifying off the top of my head, so I think we have a ways to go. And certainly, this is the public perception. So, again, you know, there are multiple reasons for the long-run decline in response rates, but I do believe one of the many reasons is a sense of I'm going to give my data to the government and it's not necessarily going to be secure. So how do we address that is a fundamental issue.

Mr. Girishankar: Yeah. Thank you for opining on that or sharing your perspective on that.

The other trust issue, frankly, is actions at BLS a few months ago raises questions and concerns about politicization. And I just wanted to give you the opportunity to share your perspective from where you sit on this. How do we preserve credibility of the system and the perception of the credibility of the system?

Dr. Calabria: Sure. You know, this is a fascinating topic and it hits home to me. For those who don't know my background, the last important Supreme Court case over agency independence, Collins versus Yellen in 2001 that dealt with the Federal Housing Finance Agency, the person sitting in that seat at the time was me.

Mr. Girishankar: Right. (Laughs.)

Dr. Calabria: So, you know, my job went to the Supreme Court. And despite my view that I helped successfully navigate the housing and mortgage market through the pandemic, you know, the response was: You're fired. So, again, but that's politics. It's Washington.

And I think we have to understand that, you know, everything in government is embedded in politics and is embedded in accountability. There's no this sort of statistical – first of all, let's start with Census Bureau is not the Federal Reserve. So these kind of debates about independence and accountability, they're oranges and apples to some extent. What you have is wanting to make sure that the data gives you the right answer.

And so go back to my earlier comment. Certainly from my perspective – and I, again, mean this quite sincerely – I'm starting out with the premise of half of what I think is wrong and I don't know which half. So if I'm not interacting with the statistical system in a way – if I'm not talking to Vipin and Ron and they're not helping me get data to understand that, then I'm not eliminating what I think is wrong and increasing what I think is right. And so for me, you're simply not making good answers. And I think that's important to the public policy process, is how do we get to good answers so that we know the policies we're doing are actually effective.

And again, so I think that philosophy of I want the right answer. I don't want someone to just repeat back something to me or just – again, I don't – it's a waste of my time to engage in confirmation bias. I'll do that when I'm back in the private sector, maybe. But again, as a policymaker, it's a waste of your time and you're not having an efficient impact because at the end of the day all of the economic policies are really meant to grow the economy, grow opportunity. And if you don't – if you're not regularly testing whether they're actually doing that, then you're not going to be effective.

Mr. Girishankar: Yeah. No, totally hear that. And by the way, I think you're probably an outlier when it comes to the population.

Dr. Calabria: No, I mean, well, having worked on the Hill I can certainly say the view of, like, what does the data tell us is a very much minority view on Capitol Hill.

Mr. Girishankar: Right.

And I just offer this, which is I think for many folks independence – institutional independence gives the sense that, well, someone's checking to make sure that, you know, the process is robust and the output is robust. I guess the question is, how does one do that in the current –

Dr. Calabria: I think part of the tension – and I – and I recognize within the statistical community, you know, the use of independence I think means something different. You know, again, you know, I come from more of a financial services background where we talk about the Federal Reserve or we talk about – you know, again, one of my jobs at CFPB, which was the other – one of the other big independence cases. So I think there's a bit of an orange and apple, and I – and I think it kind of confuses the debate.

It's also important to ask, you know, there's always that kind of silent

independence from whom. I mean, I don't want to – you know, to state the banal, no social, no government institution exists in a vacuum; they all exist in a web of social relationships. So the question really fundamentally is, independence from whom? Do you mean independence from the political system, from elected representatives? Because, again, nobody's ever truly independent. And so, again, to me, I worry that some of this sounds like independence from my party, not from the other party; or, independence from these institutions or the purview of the elite, and therefore the public should not have a view. And again, so I do worry that the use of the word "independence" implies and leads up to sort of an in-group, out-group dynamic, which I think is unhelpful for strengthening the broad public acceptance of these agencies over time.

Like, again, not to go down too much of a rabbit hole, but one of my day jobs is at the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau. That has been a fight about that agency's independence for years. I think it would be tragic to turn the Census Bureau into as polarizing a figure as what the CFPB has become. It would be extremely damaging for Census. So my recommendation when we have these independence debates is keep in mind they're loaded. There's a lot of baggage, and there's a lot of implications to it, and let's not go down that world because I think it's been extremely destructive in the financial services world. So let's not repeat that.

And at the end of the day, how do you make sure that these statistical agencies have broad, bipartisan, across-the-spectrum support, and that they're seen as credible and not speaking for one party or the other? Because, again, I don't want data that backs up whatever I already think; I want data that helps me understand what's going on in the world.

Mr. Girishankar: Yeah.

One more topic to raise with you is the U.S. statistical system is the global benchmark in many ways. And I think you've talked about in the past the importance of setting global standards and U.S. leadership abroad. And you know, I was describing earlier the way we think about economic security and its importance for growth, for the security of assets and markets, but importantly global influence. So what are you doing on that front?

Dr. Calabria: Yeah. And – well, and I'll just say – all I'm going to say, I mean, especially probably the preeminent global issue right now is trade. And how do we bring additional statistics to bear?

So it's often the case that, you know, as we say, you end up counting

what counts. And so this is – nowhere is this better illustrated than the focus on tariffs, for instance. We can measure tariffs. We know tariffs. What's a lot harder to measure but equally important is nontariff trade barriers, for instance. So how can we bring more statistical power to bear? And I know there's been lots of work on this. The World Bank has done – made a great effort. But again, I think we're just in kind of the infancy of understanding the quantification of nontariff trade barriers.

How do we understand subsidies? So, you know, part of my career has been working on issues around Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, and there have been tremendous work – you know, Deb Lucas at MIT, for instance, has done a lot of work on quantifying the subsidies that have gone to Fannie and Freddie. Well, how do we quantify the subsidies that go to Chinese steel manufacturers? How do we – how do we get a better sense of what these nontariff trade barriers are? And we really can't, you know, fundamentally address them unless we have a better quantification of them and a better understanding.

So in some sense trade has gotten more complicated because there's – so much nontariff activity goes on. Yet, you know, so much of the conversation is what we can measure. But I do want to make the argument we need to do a much better job at measuring the harder parts of trade because those really are some of the fundamental barriers.

You know, I worked on our – some of the Japan deal we did in the first term, and so much of our trade relationship with Japan are nontariff trade barriers. So, you know – especially on the – on the food side, you know, and the ability to export potatoes or rice or beef to Japan has been historically very difficult for a number of reasons. And so, again, how do you get some measurement around these things? Because if you don't get measurement, ultimately, how do you get enforcement? How do you get to credibility of these trade agreements unless people can know – or, you know, a lot – one of the probably most fundamental debates of the first term around NAFTA and USMCA was rules of origin. How do you measure how much of a car being assembled in Mexico is actually electronics from China?

So, you know, again, trying to get those things measured, trying to – the supply chain. And of course, the pandemic brought supply-chain issues to the forefront in a very big way. But they're fundamental to, I think, the trade conversation, and getting more and better data there. And I know that Vipin and everybody at BEA is doing, I think, a terrific job on the international front to get us better data and a better understanding.

But again, fundamentally I just want to repeat the theme of for us to be

able to know that the policies we're implementing are effective we have to have better data. We have to have accurate data. And that's what we're trying to achieve.

Mr. Girishankar: That's such a powerful point. And in fact, you know, the theme of this is federal statistics and economic security, and when you think of the broad panoply of economic security issues trade, trade restrictions with export controls, investments screening of various kinds, I can imagine a whole research agenda and data-development agenda around these topics that could serve the next generation of American policymakers. So I think, you know, what you're saying there resonates very strongly.

Dr. Calabria: I mean, for good or bad, we count what we can count, if you will. And so how do we bring more and more factors that have not been counted or weighed, you know, into that quantitative situation? Obviously, you need to be cautious of always recognizing that just because you can't quantify something doesn't mean it's not important. (Laughs.) But again, you know, having been in Washington for a long time in these debates, you know, people do immediately go to what they can quantify. And so the pressure there is the better inform the debate part of that margin has to be quantified, more aspects of it.

Mr. Girishankar: Yes. And it shapes the lexicon of how we talk about modern life. (Laughs.) And so – (laughs) –

Dr. Calabria: Absolutely. And I think it does give us, you know, a better understanding. And it – you know, and it does – you know, it's easy – you know, there's always a vein of complaining about the present. And as somebody who's a little bit of a statistics geek, you know, like, you know, I loved Robert Gordon's book when you go back and look at these massive time series and, you know, what did life look like in 1900 – (laughs) – you know? And unless you've got that data where you can go back – and I think it does give you a great appreciation of the progress we've made. And again, so I think it helps you ground your current experience in what the historical trends have been.

So I'm a big advocate of the data. And I think what I bring to this perspective is, you know, that of a user.

But I'll lastly say – mention the three jobs. I mean, I'm ultimately here as a transitional figure while we build out having somebody come in as chief statistician full-time. So I'm trying to have less jobs, not more, so this is just a –

Mr. Girishankar: (Laughs.)

Dr. Calabria: This is just a transition for me until we end up getting someone to do this full job.

Mr. Girishankar: Well, let me – you've been – we've gone over the time that you have, but you'll – if you'll indulge me for a moment we've been talking, at least with today's event – we're going to go into roundtables and do some – roll up our sleeves and do some work together, this group of people who are in the system, who have been working on the – in the data community for a while, private-sector folks. Part of the thing is what does the statistical system of the future look like relative to where we are now? Obviously, there are things that you have identified that we should be doing right now. But what would be helpful if we were to start developing a gameplan? How would you have us think about that?

Dr. Calabria: So I think we – you know, while I think we should make every effort to arrest the decline in response rates, I think we do have to accept as a fundamental that we're probably only going to have limited success there if we continue just to do what we're doing. And part of the debate internally – you know, and this is one of the things that frustrates me to some extent – is often the debate is to say, well, we're having declining response rates, so we'll just survey more and more people. And to me, you're not adequately dealing with the increasing potential for non-response bias in your estimates. So just doubling the sample size, to me, is not a fix.

You know, and I'm not going to put any pressure on Ron to say – you know, to me I think it's stunning to recognize that the – in inflation-adjusted terms the 2020 Census cost five times per household what the 1970 Census cost. So how do we think about this? And again, it's almost like one of these 80/20 things; 20 percent of those respondents are 80 percent of the cost. And so I recognize Ken's comments and others earlier about the budget, but you've also seen many of these surveys where the just cost per respondent, you know, has been exploding. In fact, I think, you know, not to get too meta to say if you did a survey today, and you told the American public that it cost a hundred dollars per household to do the 2020 Census, and asked them would they rather have the hundred dollars or do the Census, I'm going to tell you about 50 percent of them would probably want the hundred dollars. So how do you prove to them that they're getting value? And how do they – and how do we accept that – you know, how do you deal with that tale of non-response?

This is one reason why I have some optimism for some elements of AI. So, for instance, we can build a better address frame. We can better get to those respondents who don't respond. Because, again, on the plus side – because, again, I'm half – a glass-half-full guy much of the time –

you know, 80-some respondents to the 2020 Census went online and entered their data. Please do that. That is an extremely cost-effective way for us – (laughs) – for us to collect the data. And then, if you happen to know somebody in the 20 percent who didn't do that, please encourage them to do that. And so, again, how do we get more cost-effective ways, but also recognizing that an increasing part of the cost is that tail response?

Mr. Girishankar: Yeah.

Mark, this has been phenomenal. Thank you. You've been so generous with your time and your insights. And I just want to – everyone should applaud Mark for coming and – (applause) –

Dr. Calabria: Thank you. I appreciate the conversation. (Applause.)

(END.)