Conversations with Bill Kristol

Guest: Ronald Brownstein, Senior Editor, *The Atlantic*; Senior Political Analyst, CNN

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KRISTOL: Hi, I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome to CONVERSATIONS. I'm very pleased to be joined today by Ron Brownstein, Senior – what is your important title? Senior Editor at *The Atlantic*.

BROWNSTEIN: Mm-hmm.

KRISTOL: Senior Analyst on CNN. A veteran reporter and analyst of American politics. One of the ones I've learned the most from over the years, and generally one of the most respected, I think. Early in seeing some of the trends that we're now seeing manifesting themselves, I think, that we saw in the 2016 election, but let's come back to the history to begin with.

BROWNSTEIN: Yes.

KRISTOL: Where we are. What happened in 2016? One-off fluke or something more significant?

BROWNSTEIN: No, I think of – first of all, it's great to be here with you, Bill. I think of 2016 as the culmination, really, of long term trends. And both trends in the competition between the parties, but also trends in the way the public relates to the political system. I met you in 1985, I believe, when you were the precocious protégé chief of staff, at a very young age, to Bill Bennett at the Education Department, and –

KRISTOL: I came to Washington in '85. That's very nice of you. The check's in the mail for that. That was excellent. [Laughter]

BROWNSTEIN: Right. Yes, and I was at least a younger reporter at that point, and, you know, it –

KRISTOL: With the *LA Times*.

BROWNSTEIN: *National Journal* at that point. Then the *LA Times*. And, you know, that was the first presidential campaign I covered in 1984, and I think the first point to – thinking about 2016 – is I find it hard to imagine that 30 years ago, or even 15 years ago that Donald Trump – or, for that matter, Bernie

Sanders – would have gotten nearly as far as they did in the primaries. I mean, between them they won 25 million votes in the primaries, and –

KRISTOL: Each one about 45 percent of his own party.

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah, yeah, of their own party, right? I think if you look back, I do not think nearly as many people would have said, "They crossed the threshold that I expect in a commander and chief." But I think what has happened over the last generation, for a lot of different reasons we can talk about, is that the public has lost an enormous amount of faith in *conventional* political leadership, in the same way that faith has eroded in all sorts of other institutions, whether it's business leaders, labor leaders, media figures, pretty much everything short of the military and maybe non-profits in your immediate orbit.

And I think what that did is that it made more people open to looking at something outside of the usual parameters. And in fact, the fact that Trump was something different was an important part of his appeal to the voters drawn to him; even as it, you know, repelled a lot of other voters. So that's the, I think that's the first threshold. I mean, the personal characteristics, the qualities, the style, the tenor, the tone, all of those things, I have a hard time imagining that really getting off the ground in, say, 1992. And I think we see, you know – and 1992 is a good example because Ross Perot got to 19 percent.

KRISTOL: Right.

BROWNSTEIN: You know, and Donald Trump –

KRISTOL: And Pat Buchanan.

BROWNSTEIN: And Pat Buchanan, right.

KRISTOL: Got some votes in the primaries.

BROWNSTEIN: It got – there was a limit.

Now, in terms of the actual competition, once you got down to Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, you know, there's a tendency to look at this as a one-off or something. In fact, what we saw – and we can talk about this in more length – is all of the demographic and geographic trends that had been re-sorting and re-segmenting the electorate that, in many ways, go back to the '80s and '90s, all of them were intensified in this election. I mean, I think this election took every fault line in American life and it just drove an earthquake right through them.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's interesting. So it's not the kind of conventional "this was so different from the previous ones."

BROWNSTEIN: No. It was just bigger. It was more. It was more.

KRISTOL: Yeah, so let's talk about some – talk to some of those points.

BROWNSTEIN: Right. So look. I mean, I think that, you know, the story – the big story of American politics – there's a lot of big stories, but it is that over roughly the last 30 years – I mean, you can trace it back to the 1960s, certainly, and that's true, but really, since the Reagan era, I think we have been living through an overlapping geographic and demographic sorting out and re-sorting of the parties. You know, we have a Democratic Party that increasingly, since the Bill Clinton era in the '90s, runs best among young people, minorities, and more, is stronger among college-educated, white-collar whites than among blue-collar whites, which were the heart of the party, from, you know, Franklin Roosevelt through basically Jimmy Carter.

And the geographic corollary of all of this is that increasingly the party's support is concentrated in the biggest urban areas, which are diverse, which are culturally tolerant, which are mostly post-industrial, which are integrated into the global economy. And so you have this kind of upstairs/downstairs coalition that is largely centered on whites above the median income, who are professionals, and working-class minorities. I mean, that is pretty much the Democratic coalition, and it's overwhelmingly revolving around cities. Even when Clinton won in '92 and '96 –

KRISTOL: I was going to ask, isn't Clinton the –

BROWNSTEIN: Now Clinton's got – yeah, Clinton's the last –

KRISTOL: Were you the one who invented the beer –

BROWNSTEIN: Beer track and wine track, yes.

KRISTOL: Beer track and wine track during the Democratic primaries?

BROWNSTEIN: During the primaries, right. And that's the idea, that there's usually a candidate, one candidate who relies on working-class white voters and minorities and one candidate who is more the candidate of white, upper-middle class, Volvo liberals, you know? And almost always the beer-track candidate has beaten the wine-track candidate until you get to Obama, who kind of moved African-Americans out of the beer category, combined it with the white, upper-middle class against Clinton, who had Hispanics, which are growing, and blue-collar whites, and beat her by, you know, that much. In fact, there are some tallies that conclude she won more votes, ultimately, than he did in 2008.

But so you have this Democratic Party that I think is a, you know, essentially a coalition, I believe, of voters who are largely comfortable with both the economic and especially cultural and demographic change that the country's living through. It's heavily urbanized.

Bill Clinton, who was still trying to hold onto more of blue collar, religious, non-urban America, both of his elections he won half the counties in America, almost exactly half the counties. By the time Obama won re-election in 2012, he was down to less than a quarter of the counties.

KRISTOL: Which means the majority of the vote –

BROWNSTEIN: He won by 5 million votes, but he wins less than 700 counties. He wins fewer counties in winning than Michael Dukakis won in losing.

KRISTOL: Wow.

BROWNSTEIN: He won fewer than any winner in at least the last 100 years, until you get to Hillary Clinton. You know, you fast-forward four years further, she wins the popular vote by about, you know, 3 – almost 3 million votes. She wins fewer than 500 counties.

KRISTOL: Just to be clear, what are there, how many counties in America?

BROWNSTEIN: 3,100.

KRISTOL: 3,100.

BROWNSTEIN: She wins – Here's the statistic that I think is really kind of relevant. She wins 88 of the 100 largest counties, okay? Donald Trump wins 2,600 of the other 3,000. He wins more counties than any candidate in either party since Reagan in '84. Just think about that. Donald Trump won more counties than anybody since Ronald Reagan.

And, you know, essentially he consolidated and intensified, you know, what has been the movement toward a Republican coalition that is strongest among blue-collar whites, religiously-devout whites – I mean, that's something that goes all the way back to Reagan – evangelicals, and the most church-going Catholics, and then non-urban whites, right?

And, you know, and what Trump did was, it really was the death of 1,000 cuts for Clinton. He beat her everywhere that Romney might have won by two, he won by ten. If Obama won by three, he won by five. Outside of these big urban centers, the Democrat –

KRISTOL: Where he did worse, incidentally.

BROWNSTEIN: What's that?

KRISTOL: Where Trump did worse than –

BROWNSTEIN: Where he did worse. He lost them by more. He lost them by even more than Romney. Obama won 86 of the 100 largest counties. Clinton won 88, and that includes, you know, not just the counties in New York and San Francisco and Austin and Dallas and – oh, I mean Austin and Seattle and Denver, kind of the centers of the new economy. I mean, she won Dallas County. I mean, she won Harris County with Houston. She won counties around Atlanta. Density and the kind of the post-industrial – I believe these things have kind of converged, and we now have a situation where you have a Democratic Party that is basically comfortable both with economic and cultural change, and the economic side's more disputed because of the Sander's side.

And you have a Republican coalition that is largely, you know, it's predominately white, still 90 percent of Trump's votes came from whites, heavily blue collar, older, more religiously devout, mostly outside of the urban centers, much more tied to traditional manufacturing, much more tied to resource extraction.

One more kind of cool stat that I think gets at this, if you look at – one thing I've tried to look at the last few elections is I rank, the Energy Department ranks states by per capita emissions of carbon, okay? And that basically tells you two things. Is it a resource extraction state, and is it a manufacturing state? Because the manufacturing states tend to be the states that rely on coal more, because it has historically been the cheapest. Of the 32 states that emit the most carbon per person, Trump won 27 of them. Of the 18 that emit the least, which are mostly post-industrial states along the coast, Clinton won 15 of them.

KRISTOL: Wow. So two Americas in a way.

BROWNSTEIN: Two Americas. Two Americas. And you know, it's the same – pretty much the same in the House.

KRISTOL: It's worth going back to, for people who don't remember this, I mean, '88 election when – After we met each other in an election I was marginally involved in, which you covered.

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah.

KRISTOL: I mean, Bush won California and New Jersey, I believe.

BROWNSTEIN: Right, right. And Dukakis won a lot of rural counties, and Democrats represented them.

KRISTOL: Right, and you didn't have this kind of red-blue –

BROWNSTEIN: Right, the map – as I said, Dukakis won more counties in losing than Obama won in winning.

KRISTOL: Right. So it really is a big change.

BROWNSTEIN: And I – you know, you go back to the '70s, Jimmy Carter only won about 55 of the 100 largest counties.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

BROWNSTEIN: I mean, there were a lot of places – but, you know, we have sorted out. I mean, two things have happened. The parities' appeals have become more divergent, and the distance between them, and kind of the signals they're sending to voters.

But also we have sorted out in where we live. I mean, the great statistic that my friend Bill Bishop, who wrote *The Big Sort*, provides is that in this election, in the 2016 election, 60 percent of us lived in counties that were decided by 20 points or more.

KRISTOL: Wow.

BROWNSTEIN: That's a big –

KRISTOL: In a close election.

BROWNSTEIN: In a close election.

KRISTOL: In a two, three percentage point margin.

BROWNSTEIN: Two – right, exactly. We had – you know, and that's far more than in the '70s in, say, the Carter/Ford election, which was comparable, you know, closeness.

And the House is very similar. Eighty percent of the House Republicans are in districts that are more white than the national average. Two-thirds of the Democrats are in districts that are more non-white. Three-quarters of the House Republicans are in districts with fewer white college graduates than the national average. Two-thirds of the Democrats are in districts with more. And the last one, 60 percent of the House Republicans are in districts with, where the median age is above the national average, 60 percent of the Democrats below.

So you see just this – and what Trump did, in many ways, I think – I look at it geographically. If you look at where the Republicans made the breakthroughs in the House in 2010 and 2014, when they essentially exterminated what you and I grew up calling the blue-dog Democrats: kind of the rural, conservative John Sprat, John Murtha, Ike Skelton Democrats. Obama held enough of those places in 2012, especially in the Midwest, in the upper-Midwest, and they all fell to Trump this time. I mean, Clinton could not hold almost any of them, and –

KRISTOL: Is that more you think because of Obama and Clinton or because of Romney and Trump?

BROWNSTEIN: More, I think a little combination of both. I mean, what Obama was able to do to Romney, Clinton could not do to Trump, right? I mean, he made him –

KRISTOL: He could make him unacceptable.

BROWNSTEIN: He made him a class enemy.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

BROWNSTEIN: He made him the guy who came to town in the limo and took away all your jobs.

You know, it's funny, a year before the election, one of the advisors to the super PAC on the Democratic side said to me that the single most important thing to do was to disqualify Trump as a legitimate champion of the working class. And then they never really – that was not their message at all. Their entire message was aimed at white-collar, white America, that he is morally unacceptable. Do you want your kids looking at this guy for the next four years? And that simply was not relevant enough –

KRISTOL: And he has bad character, bad judgement–

BROWNSTEIN: Bad character, bad judgment, might blow the world – But not that he –

KRISTOL: Not that he would betray working-class economic interests.

BROWNSTEIN: Absolutely, and so I think a lot of working-class white voters in the Midwest, where this election was decided, and that – we should come back to one point about that – kind of looked at that argument and said, "Yeah, this is not a perfect human being. But I do not hear anything from you about how you're going to make my life better, and he at least is talking about people like me."

You know, one of the data crunchers after – and obviously the data crunchers were, you know, including myself, all of us were trying to figure out what had happened – and one of the Democratic data crunchers said to me, "I look at this election as incredibly simple in one respect: that in a lot of these communities that were losing ground, that had felt bypassed economically, culturally," – and she went like this [motions with fingers from his eyes to Kristol] – she went, "It's, like, *I see you*. You know? *I see you*, and Hillary Clinton never conveyed that." The Democratic Convention certainly didn't convey that. It was all about celebrating the new and changing America, which *is* the heart of the Democratic coalition.

But the asterisk on all of this stuff that I have written, and others have written over the years, is that for that coalition to be a majority, it depended on one anomaly: which was running much better in the Midwest among working-class whites than you did elsewhere.

So if you looked at Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Pennsylvania. From 2000 to 2012 – I'm doing this by memory, but I'm pretty sure it's right – In each of those elections – so that's, like, 20 cases – in all 20 of those cases, the Democratic nominee ran better among non-college whites in all five of those states than they did nationally.

Now, Clinton also ran better than she did nationally, but the gap converged. She cratered among working-class whites in the Midwest, and that, more than anything else, is what elected Donald Trump.

KRISTOL: And you – I mean, we were on a train together. I remember this, what the Friday before the election?

BROWNSTEIN: Friday before the election.

KRISTOL: And we both actually thought Trump had a chance, and we thought Hillary would win.

BROWNSTEIN: Right, right.

KRISTOL: It was three and four, four and five that she would win. But – and I think you said at the time that, something about that Hillary had spent more time in, which states? Than –

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah. Well, so –

KRISTOL: Well, you wrote that even.

BROWNSTEIN: I did write that. I wrote that about eight days out, that she had spent –

KRISTOL: That's right. We were discussing the article you had written.

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah. She had spent – So, you know, historically, the Democratic coalition has, in the modern era, since Bill Clinton –

First of all, before that, if you go from 1968 to 1988, Republicans won the presidency five out of six times. In the three elections of the 1980s, you know, ones that you're very familiar with – Ronald Reagan, Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush – Republicans won a larger share of the total Electoral, available Electoral College votes than any party had won over three consecutive elections since the formation of the modern party system in 1828, which means that the Democrats did better in the 1860s when they were the party of secession and rebellion than they did in the, you know, in the 1980s.

And then you get Bill Clinton and his kind of reformation of the party, and he restores their ability to compete at the national level. And you have a party that is basically centered on the two coasts but is strong in a series of Midwestern states – Illinois, Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin, Michigan, Ohio – four out of the six times, from 1992 to 2012.

And so they had this, you know, they had this kind of coalition, and the Sunbelt was mostly out of reach. Although they did – they were able to win Florida three times, I think, out of those six. But Arizona, Georgia, places like that that were demographically changing were still out of reach, largely because they could not win as many white-collar whites as they did on the coasts or in the upper-Midwest.

So Clinton kind of looked at this map and said, you know, essentially concluded that the Midwest was more secure than it was and put enormous effort into –

KRISTOL: Because they had won those states.

BROWNSTEIN: They had won those states –

KRISTOL: For five of six or six of six times.

BROWNSTEIN: Well, six of – they had won Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania six of six. They had won Iowa five of six, and they won Ohio four of six.

And they looked at those three, the Michigan, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, which were in what I had termed, my phrase: "the Blue Wall," from 2009, which was the states that Democrats had won six straight times – and they looked at that and they said, "Okay, you know, these are pretty secure," – Not Pennsylvania; they fought for Pennsylvania. But the other two, Michigan and Wisconsin – "So we can put all of our money and time into our reach states," you know?

And the three big ones were Florida, North Carolina, and Ohio, as well as a little dabbling in Arizona. But the big three were Florida, Ohio, and North Carolina. None of which were in the first 270 she would need to win.

KRISTOL: But all of which were very tempting cause they've been so incredibly close in so many [elections], 2000, 2004, 2012.

BROWNSTEIN: But what happened – the imbalance. The imbalance got to the point where she had spent, on television, as of late October, 180 million dollars in North Carolina, Ohio, and Florida and six in Michigan and Wisconsin. She had not visited them up until the last week of the election since the primaries.

KRISTOL: Right.

BROWNSTEIN: And then –

KRISTOL: Pennsylvania – so the Clinton people will say –

BROWNSTEIN: Pennsylvania they fought. Yeah.

KRISTOL: They did fight Pennsylvania.

BROWNSTEIN: They did. They fought Pennsylvania as hard as you could, and that –

KRISTOL: And even there, maybe they fought it too much in the Philadelphia suburbs.

BROWNSTEIN: They did. Yeah.

KRISTOL: I'm sure they didn't fight in the western part of the state?

BROWNSTEIN: They didn't, and they basically conceded the middle, right? That was kind of the story.

And I thing one thing Democrats have to learn from this election is that margins matter. And, you know, it is pretty clear that a modern Democratic Party that is pro-gay rights, pro-transgender rights, pro-climate action, pro-citizenship for undocumented immigrants, pro-free contraception under Obamacare, and five other things that we can name, they are not going to win most non-college whites. They're not going to win most rural communities. They're certainly not going to win, you know, most evangelical whites. But that doesn't mean you can allow the floor to fall out, right?

And I think one of the clearest lessons is you have to end up – you have to fight in those communities. You have to find a place where you can make at least *some* stand and try to prevent what I described before, this death by 1,000 cuts, where Trump just magnified the margin everywhere.

Now he's, I think he's giving them openings because he is not governing in a way that reflects the values – maybe not the values – the interests of those voters as nearly as much as he promised. So there is that opening, but you have to find a way to talk to those voters at least somewhat. You have to sand down the edges of the, you know, the blade.

KRISTOL: Were they made overconfident by the notion that demography is on their side? There are more and more college-educated people. Younger people are not dying at the rate older people are dying, and more and more minorities, so they just sort of had this – Obama won 52 and then 51 percent.

BROWNSTEIN: Right.

KRISTOL: Why wouldn't Clinton win 51 or 52 percent?

BROWNSTEIN: Right, and look, I mean –

KRISTOL: Against a very flawed candidate.

BROWNSTEIN: Against a very flawed candidate. And I think that, you know, people like me probably contributed to that belief because the electorate is continuing to change, and even here, you know – but turnout matters and margins matter.

KRISTOL: Right.

BROWNSTEIN: Right? So even in this election – it's a really important point.

So, I mean, the basic story of the electorate is it's been getting more diverse and better educated. And we have two sources of data on who votes. We have more, but the two main sources are the census and the exit poll, right? And they have – they're different in their level, but the basic story is the same. They each show that every four years, going back to the early 1990s, the minority share of the vote has increased about two points, the college-educated share has gone up slightly, and the white non-college share, what has become, you know, the core of the Trump coalition, has declined. And in fact, even in this election –

KRISTOL: And give us a sense of those numbers –

BROWNSTEIN: Sure. So –

KRISTOL: Because, I think, cause the change is pretty stark. It happens slowly, every 1 or 2 percent every 4 years, but over – comparing the Reagan electorate to the –

BROWNSTEIN: So the Reagan electorate –

KRISTOL: The Trump electorate is pretty startling, as I recall.

BROWNSTEIN: The Reagan electorate was – roughly speaking, two-thirds of the voters were non-college whites. Then about another 25 percent, a little less than 25 percent, were college whites, and then the last 10 percent –

KRISTOL: Twelve of the – yeah, were –

BROWNSTEIN: Ten, 12 percent were minorities, depending on whether it's '80 or '84.

When Bill Clinton was elected the first time, a majority of the voters in both the exit poll and the census were still non-college whites.

KRISTOL: Wow.

BROWNSTEIN: But as I said, they have declined steadily.

KRISTOL: So now where are they about?

BROWNSTEIN: So they – in the census, they are 42 percent of the vote. In the exit poll, they're 34 percent of the vote. So they're, that's the biggest difference, in who responds. And the answer is probably somewhere in between. But it almost doesn't matter because they started from a different place – the census and the exit [poll] – but they show movement: two points every four years.

What didn't happen this year is the minority share of the vote did not go up its usual two points every four years, and that was because of turn out. It's – the census gives you a second data source, which is the eligible, the potential voter pool. And in that, the eligible voter pool, the minority share of the vote increased two points again from 2012 to 2016. It's going to increase two points every four years in eligible voters probably, you know, as far as we can see.

But, because African-American turnout significantly declined, the biggest decline from election to election that we've recorded among African-Americans, and because Hispanic turnout, rather shockingly, did not improve –

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's – I mean, you'd suspect that the African-American turnout to go down, maybe, because the first African-American president is no longer on the ticket.

BROWNSTEIN: Right. But Hispanic turnout did not go up.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's –

BROWNSTEIN: It went up in a couple places. It went up in Arizona. It went up in Nevada, but it did not go up overall, which I think has to be very daunting for Democrats. Because the turnout didn't go up, despite the potential increase in the minority [voter pool], it basically stayed the same or increased about half a point or a point, and that hurt her.

Millennials, their turnout improved a little but not as much, and there she was really hurt, I think not so much by turnout as by the bleed off to Gary Johnson and Jill Stein.

KRISTOL: Yeah, what about millennials? So someone like me who's a, I think still a Republican and certainly a conservative, and worries most about Trump just – I mean, how can you have a party going forward?

BROWNSTEIN: Right.

KRISTOL: There already are demographic trends that are somewhat unfavorable to the Republican Party and the conservatives, and they needn't be, maybe, with a different Republican message, and the messengers would – anyway, they have been empricially [INAUDIBLE].

BROWNSTEIN: Right.

KRISTOL: ... empirically with now six or seven of the elections since the end of the Cold War. Democrats have won the plurality of the popular vote –

BROWNSTEIN: And, by the way, which has never happened before in American history since 1928. No party has ever won six out of seven of the popular vote.

KRISTOL: Well, and then if you're losing younger voters, and they tend to stay where they begin, right?

BROWNSTEIN: That is, I think – that is a real – that is the biggest challenge that Trump presents.

KRISTOL: And how bad was the millennial vote, then, in this election?

BROWNSTEIN: So, first of all, one way to button up the previous minute we were talking about, I often think about this. Donald Trump won exactly the same share of non-college whites as Ronald Reagan did. It was, in '84. It was the most that anybody had won since 1984, but think about the difference. That vote share among non-college whites got Ronald Reagan to 59 percent of the total vote. It got Donald Trump to 46.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's –

BROWNSTEIN: So even though there are problems for Democrats in the way the electorate is dividing, particularly, I think, much more in Congress than in the presidential, Republicans do face this reality: that they are relying on larger and larger margins from a group that is inexorably shrinking and will continue to shrink. If it didn't go back up in this election, if the non-college white share of the vote declined even with Donald Trump and his magnetic connection with them, it's hard to see what's going to cause it to go back. And by the way, it continued to decline even in those five Midwestern states that decided the election.

KRISTOL: Just because of the demographic numbers.

BROWNSTEIN: Just because of demographics.

So millennials. Millennials in – we're about to cross a threshold. In 2018, for the first time ever, millennials will be a larger share of eligible voters than baby boomers. This is a big moment for us baby boomers. The baby boom has been the largest generation of eligible voters since 1978. Forty years. I mean, they passed the greatest generation in 1978, and they passed them presidentially in 1980. And I believe in 1984 they passed them as the largest group of *actual* voters, right? So the distinction between people who are eligible to vote and the people that actually show up. They have been the largest generation of the electorate since then.

The millennials will be the largest generation of eligible voters in 2018. Now in 2020 –

KRISTOL: Millennials as born in –

BROWNSTEIN: 1981 or '82 through roughly 2000.

KRISTOL: Right.

BROWNSTEIN: '81 through 2000 is what people describe as millennials.

And in this midterm election for the first time, they will be a larger share of the potential voters, the eligible voters, than baby boomers. They will not be a larger share of the actual voters because there is still a big turnout gap. I think baby boomers are about 18 points more likely – you know, higher turnout.

Nonetheless, if you look at the way the lines are crossing, probably in 2024, if not 2022, millennials will be a larger share, not only of eligible voters, but *actual* voters. And this is really hard to believe, in 2020, the first post-millennials will enter the electorate, right?

KRISTOL: Right.

BROWNSTEIN: People born after 2000. The estimate is they will be about three percent of eligible voters in 2020.

And then when you get to 2024, millennials and post-millennials are about 45 percent of eligible voters, and the baby boomers are about 28. So by then, certainly, they're going to be a bigger share of actual voters. And that's where, I think, Trump is the real, is the biggest risk to the Republican Party. Because you're looking at a guy right now who has an approval rating, depending on the poll, between 20 and 29 percent among millennials.

KRISTOL: The actual vote he got is –

BROWNSTEIN: He got about the same as Romney, 35 [percent]. And he got the same as Romney largely in an interesting way.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

BROWNSTEIN: Okay? In 2012, there was very little difference between the vote among college and non-college white millennials, okay? Romney won 'em both, won the non-college whites by a little more. The college whites, narrowly won them over Obama.

This election, they went like that [points each hand in opposite direction]. I mean, Trump won blue-collar, non-college white millennials by about 20 points. And Clinton won the college-educated white millennials by double digits.

KRISTOL: So a massive gap within the generation.

BROWNSTEIN: Within the generation.

KRISTOL: Is that common? I guess – well, I guess maybe you saw that in the '60s or '70s.

BROWNSTEIN: It's the widest – no, it's the widest – I looked back to 2000, and it was by far the widest.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's interesting.

BROWNSTEIN: Since 2000. Well, the gap between, *overall*, between college and non-college whites, think about it. I mean, Hillary Clinton ran 17 points better among college-educated than non-college whites. That's more than double the biggest gap that I've seen before, which was seven.

KRISTOL: Wow.

BROWNSTEIN: In '08.

KRISTOL: Right.

BROWNSTEIN: So the huge divergence.

Okay, so millennials. We know millennials don't like the Muslim executive order. Seventy percent of them oppose building the wall. Over 70 percent oppose pulling out of the climate treaty. Roughly 70 percent oppose the healthcare proposals, and they are, you know, two-thirds to three-quarters say that Donald Trump does not reflect their values. Now that does not mean he will not win more of them than those numbers suggest, once there's an alternative. But he's not going to win a lot more of them than those numbers suggest.

KRISTOL: And am I right to – so Trump won about 35 percent, I think, of –

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah, yeah. Millennials, yeah.

KRISTOL: And Romney about the same.

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah.

KRISTOL: And McCain probably about maybe –

BROWNSTEIN: McCain won – a little lower, but –

KRISTOL: Yeah, he went a little lower?

BROWNSTEIN: A little lower.

KRISTOL: Yeah, this was Obama's first election.

BROWNSTEIN: Right, right. Obama got two-thirds the first time –

KRISTOL: So in three straight elections, if you want to be pessimistic, which I do because I'm a Republican –

BROWNSTEIN: Third.

KRISTOL: Yeah, they basically got a third of, let's say, the youth vote or youth...

BROWNSTEIN: Yes.

KRISTOL: Young adult [INAUDIBLE].

BROWNSTEIN: Young adults, yeah.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's not a good prospect for a party, is it?

BROWNSTEIN: That's not a – No.

KRISTOL: So on the one hand you've got a Republican Party that controls the presidency, the Congress, 32, I think, governorships.

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah.

KRISTOL: Two-thirds of the state legislatures, and on the other hand they're getting one-third of the vote of the rising generation.

BROWNSTEIN: Of the people who will be the biggest generation of the electorate. Well, I mean, you know, the –

KRISTOL: An unusual situation, somehow.

BROWNSTEIN: So – and the answer may be – so, like, there is one kind of way to kind of harmonize or make sense of these two divergent trends. Which is that I think there is a lot of evidence that the groups at the core of the Republican coalition: [1] older whites, where Trump won – Republicans have now won 60 percent of whites over 45 in several elections in a row. [2] Blue-collar whites, [3] evangelical and other religious devout whites, and [4] non-urban whites. Those are the four big groups, and yes, there are a lot of upper-income college – you know, but those voters actually split about in half, so –

But the four kind of horsemen, the four biggest groups, there is an argument that those groups are, as they feel more embattled, eclipsed demographically, culturally, even economically, that they are seeing a greater identity in the Republican Party.

So Democrats are somewhat, the argument is the Democrats are on a treadmill, which is that as the white share, as each of those groups decline as a share of the vote, the Republican's share of their votes goes up. Because precisely the act of retreat, you know, what David Brooks called "the receding roar of the diminished white majority" is moving them further in a direction where they see the Republican Party, in essence, as a white party defending their values against this urbanized, diverse, millennial America that doesn't share their values.

So I'm pretty sympathetic to that argument. I mean, I think there is – now there are obviously practical limits. I mean, there are some blue-collar whites who are in unions or you know. And maybe a candidate with Joe Biden, this probably would not have happened to this extent. But the basic idea that as the demography changes, the groups that are shrinking are becoming more solidified in the Republican coalition, I think, is basically right.

KRISTOL: Yeah, it's amazing. We got used to African-Americans voting 90 to 10 percent for Democrats, and not just for the presidency but in many, many races. And, you know, some of that was considered just a unique kind of block vote that, you know, could never be replicated anywhere else. And I guess we're not going to get to ninety/ten –

BROWNSTEIN: But –

KRISTOL: But you do get that sort of more identity politics...

BROWNSTEIN: You do.

KRISTOL: ...in other groups now, or –

BROWNSTEIN: You know, if you believe the exit polls – and they may have been slightly off, but, you know, they're generally right – non-college whites voted for Trump at exactly the same percentage as Hispanics voted for Clinton.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

BROWNSTEIN: And they were triple the share of the electorate.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

BROWNSTEIN: The non-college whites. So, you know, to the extent they – you know, Trump clearly – I mean, as did Buchanan, but Trump even more explicitly –

I mean, I say all the time: Donald Trump made Pat Buchanan look euphemistic. I mean, he appealed to this kind of sense of white, you know, white anxiety, I think, and economic anxiety and cultural anxiety, the sense that we are being passed over economically, all of the growth is going – Nobody who grows up around here can stay here, which I think is a very powerful and a really difficult thing for parents to deal with. That the values of the society are moving away from our values. And that, you know, we are being told all of the time that the demography of the country is changing.

And by the way, President Obama, in your living room, on your television every night provides a pretty powerful symbol that this is not, you know, the America of 1955. And I think a lot of people, when Donald Trump said, "Make America Great Again," the most important word in that phrase was *again* because it had a restoration kind of quality.

II: Demography, Geography, Politics (31:48 – 1:12:23)

KRISTOL: You mentioned President Obama. I think you were a favorite of President Bill Clinton. I guess you both kind of anticipated him and explained him.

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah.

KRISTOL: And he liked your analysis of American politics and liked your appreciation of what he had accomplished, I think.

BROWNSTEIN: What he was trying to do.

KRISTOL: Right.

BROWNSTEIN: But there was actually a strategy that it wasn't all just triangulation and opportunism, but there was a vision. I think there was a vision.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

BROWNSTEIN: As there was for Obama.

KRISTOL: How much do you think Obama, though, it wasn't just the people who saw an African-American president. They also saw a president who didn't go out of his way, unlike Bill Clinton to reach out to them at all?

BROWNSTEIN: Obama had a very different –

KRISTOL: How much of the blame does Hillary – not blame, but how much of the responsibility for the hemorrhaging of the white-working class vote in the Midwest, especially, is Hillary Clinton? And is some of it Barack Obama?

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah, some of it is – well, Obama had a very different vision than Bill Clinton.

I mean, Bill Clinton, first of all, if you think about it, he was marinated, he developed in the politics of Arkansas. In a state, even in the late '70s and '80s, where he recognized that most voters, he had to convince most voters to let him do what he wanted to do with government. Their initial instinct was not, you know, to allow government to expand in the ways, on education and on the environment and other things that he wanted it to do, and so he was always kind of trying to figure out ways to bridge the historic goals of the Democratic Party with the suspicions of government that had developed among lower-income, white working-class, rural, white voters in a state like Arkansas.

And he brought that to the national level. I mean, the new democratic agenda, the Al From agenda and the Bill – Will Marshal and Bruce Reed and, you know, Bill Clinton, all the people who developed that, it was really designed to hold on, to recapture white-working class voters who had become the Reagan Democrats in the '80s, and that was their vision. They were trying to find a halfway point on cultural values, and a way to imbed government activism within a series of other conditions, like balanced budget and personal responsibility, that would –

KRISTOL: Hard work.

BROWNSTEIN: Hard work, yeah, that would rebuild support for activist government among the white working-class. And that's how you get the crime bill of 1994, which is a classic expression of Bill Clinton's vision. Because it is unfair to say it was just a sop to white prejudices, that, you know, that the whites who wanted to crack down on black inner-city communities – In fact, it included a lot of money for a lot of stuff you, at the – what was your thing?

KRISTOL: The Project for the Republican Future.

BROWNSTEIN: Project for the Republican Future were out there bashing it for spending billions of dollars on social programs, and 100,000 hiring all these –

KRISTOL: Midnight basketball, wasn't that the –?

BROWNSTEIN: Midnight basketball was in there.

So, I mean, what Clinton did with that and with welfare reform was basically to say that the way to build, I believe, both public support – and he also thought it was more effective, it wasn't just politics –

The way to expand opportunity was to both demand responsibility and provide more government help. And if you link the two together, you could build a coalition that you could not before. And in fact, when

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the welfare bill passed, these were, in my career, the highest numbers I've ever seen in polling. Ninety percent of the country supported the welfare reform bill of '96.

KRISTOL: [Ninety]-six, yeah.

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah. Which basically said we're going to invest more in training and daycare and childcare, but you're going to have to work, right? And the entitlement. And that was kind of the –

So, you know, you fast-forward 20 years, you have a Democratic coalition that has evolved in a way that is much less dependent on those culturally conservative voters. And all of those commitments that Bill Clinton made are suspect – as we saw, by the way, in the 2016 election, when the crime bill and NAFTA and the welfare reform bill were all used as weapons against Hillary Clinton.

And there's a – kind of a simple, one number that kind of explains that: When Bill Clinton won in '92, whites without a college education, according to the exit poll, provided half of his votes. When Obama won in 2012, whites without a college education, according to the exit poll, provided a quarter of his votes. If you use the census they provided slightly more, maybe a third, 35 percent.

Nonetheless, the trend – Democrats were less dependent because of the demographic change, because of the rise of the millennials. And, you know, people forget that in the late '90s and even in the 2000 election, until the millennials entered the electorate, Republicans and Democrats split voters under 30 about evenly.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

BROWNSTEIN: It's only when the millennials started entering that it tilts toward the Democrats. But anyway, the rise of the millennials, more minorities in the electorate, more college whites voting Democratic: that has allowed Democrats to be less dependent on the voters that Bill Clinton was so focused on holding.

And what's that meant above all, for Obama, is it meant that he was able to lead them across the Rubicon where it is now a consistently, almost without exception, culturally liberal party. That's the big change, right? I mean, every, I believe every Democrat voted for the Pathway to Citizenship under, in 2013. That would not have been true in Bill Clinton. There is, you know –

KRISTOL: Every Democrat votes for funding of Planned Parenthood, etc.

BROWNSTEIN: Right. That is the big change, and that, I believe, was enabled by the belief – and again, I think I – you know, a lot of stuff I wrote has contributed to the belief that Democrats, in fact, are less dependent on the white working class than they used to be. The caveat always was that that does not mean you can fall through the floor. You know, right?

I mean, you have to – particularly in those Midwestern states, and that was always, as I said, the – I think the phrase I used once was the democratic dominance in the electoral college depended on an act of political levitation. Which was that they kind of levitated above their national number among those working class whites in the Midwest where they were still more plentiful. Even though they're shrinking, they're still half the vote or more in all of those states that I talked about, at least in the Midwest side, so –

KRISTOL: Why then, suddenly, did they succeed in that? It's not as if Obama was a natural – Kerry? I mean –

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah.

KRISTOL: Gore? I mean, it's funny that they would have done so well, in a way, in the Midwest.

BROWNSTEIN: Yes. Well, I think it is mostly because they were able to paint the Republican. It was more about that. They were able to paint the Republican as a class enemy. There's also more of a union holdover

BROWNSTEIN: Jeff Garin once said to me something I think really, I think, had a lot to it. He said –

KRISTOL: Jeff Garin is –

BROWNSTEIN: Jeff Garin is a Democratic pollster. He was the chief strategist for Clinton '08. He was the chief strategist for the Priorities PAC this time, which was the super PAC supporting Clinton. But in 2012 when this was happening – because I wrote a story in 2012 – the Democrats were running in Arizona and Colorado – I'm sorry, in Virginia, North Carolina, Colorado, say – they were running the campaign that Hillary Clinton ran in 2016. This is in 2012. They were running basically social liberalism aimed at college-educated whites, especially women. Those were the ads. You know, Mitt Romney is going to defund Planned Parenthood. He's going to affect abortion, that kind of thing.

In the Midwest though, they were running – Mitt Romney was the guy who came to town in the limo and shut down the factory and sucked – they were running Bruce Springsteen songs, right? They were running *Youngstown* and *Death to My Hometown*.

And what Jeff said was that – and I think there's a lot to this, that there is a shared narrative in the Midwest. People feel that pain. They know Youngstown, and they know those factories that are gone, and they were – the Democrats have been able to tap into that and attach the Republican to that.

And that just isn't the story, there isn't that story in the Sunbelt, of that kind of loss and failure and regression.

And then Trump upended it all because he seemed to be at once targeting all of the class enemies of the white working-class: You know, the – what they saw as the un-virtuous poor below them, the government that was indifferent to them, and then the corporate leadership that was abandoning them. He attacked all of them. He was omnidirectional.

KRISTOL: And liberal elites, obviously.

BROWNSTEIN: And the elites, and liberal elites who were *culturally* condescending to them. So it was a pretty good match.

KRISTOL: And speaking of the Democrats, what about Sanders? So, I mean, what does that mean?

BROWNSTEIN: So Sanders is – look, you know, whenever a party faces a – and I think you probably know this better than I. When a party faces a crossroads, the answer's almost always not either/or. It's always some of both, because you can't put all of your eggs in one basket, as Hillary Clinton showed us again. You cannot depend solely on the coalition of the ascendant or the, kind of the changing demography.

But I do think that Sanders does represent an important crossroads because essentially there are two visions, I think, of how Democrats can come back against Donald Trump.

One is that they find a way to win back a significant number of white working-class – the white working-class voters, the guys in Flint and Gary, not as much Indiana, but, you know, in Flint and in Altona and in Lackawanna County and all of those places. You find a way to win them back, voters who had voted for you before too, you know, in larger numbers than they do now and then stampeded toward Trump. And if you want to win them back, you know, the dominant theory among Democrats is you go in a

Sanders/Warren direction toward, you know, just turn up the populism to 11. Just, you know, bang at rich people, bang at Wall Street. Promise, you know, universal programs and, "We're going to defend you."

There's another point of view, which has, I think, more, at this point, at least, statistical merit: Which says that you have a better chance of beating Trump by making further gains in the white-collar, white suburbs where the voters were the most ambivalent about him to begin with. And it is a given that any Democrat is going to have to do better than Hillary Clinton at turning out minority voters.

But I think the core choice – and there is a real choice here – is do you have someone who, like Sanders, aim populism at the white working class? The risk of that is that that will fail to bring those voters back from Trump because he holds them so tightly on cultural grounds.

KRISTOL: Right.

BROWNSTEIN: And in the process, by going full-bore populist, you will alienate the slightly right-of-center on economic issues, white-collar, white voters who are otherwise open to you because they really loathe Trump and they do not think he should be president on personal qualities.

So I think that is a consequential choice for Democrats because if you elect Sanders, you're probably limiting your ability to make further gains in Oakland County, Michigan and in – you know, in the suburbs of Atlanta and places like that. And you're betting that you're going to go back into Macomb County, you're going to go back into Flint, and you're going to win back those voters with populism.

Because it's going to be hard for Bernie Sanders to do – or Elizabeth Warren, probably, more realistically; you know, Sanders is going to be, what, 78? 79? – I mean, hard for them to do a lot better in white-collar, white America than Clinton did. They might have trouble holding all of that vote.

The one advantage that I have to say that I have not fully factored in is that Sanders does have a magnetic connection with young people.

KRISTOL: Yeah, what is that about?

BROWNSTEIN: That is hard to – look, I mean, I think the – when we talk to voters all year –

KRISTOL: Authenticity, I guess.

BROWNSTEIN: He – you know, he – that's it. That's the word, right? He beat her among voters under 30 by more than Obama did in '08.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's amazing.

BROWNSTEIN: That is amazing, right? And it's one thing to lose young voters to Obama of '08. The Obama of that Pulitzer Prize-winning photo in the rain, you know, with the collar up. I mean, just this fierce, historical transformative charismatic figure. Okay, yeah.

Okay, you're talking about, like, a 74-year old socialist who's a dead ringer for Larry David. And he beat her by more. So weaknesses for her, but there is – And look, even Jeremy Corbin turned out a lot of young people.

KRISTOL: That's right.

BROWNSTEIN: So, you know, for those who believe that the Sanders/Warren path is very rocky because – you know, it really depends on how much you think you can win back of the white working

class from Trump. You have to win back some. You do. I think anybody would agree with that, if you're going to beat them.

But how much is realistically possible when he speaks to so many of their grievances on so many fronts? I mean, even if he doesn't bring a lot of jobs back to Flint, he has picked up the phone and yelled at the head of Ford and GM for moving, you know, and effort goes a long way in politics.

KRISTOL: Well, that's what I want to ask you. So he's governing now.

BROWNSTEIN: Yes.

KRISTOL: And so part of me thinks, look, if you're running as kind of protest candidate against a culturally sophisticated cosmopolitan, the condescending Democratic Party, and Barack Obama's pretty good, you know –

BROWNSTEIN: Mm-hmm.

KRISTOL: And Hillary Clinton, not a bad duo to run against, in a sense.

BROWNSTEIN: Right, right.

KRISTOL: And you're the challenger, and you've been out of office eight years, and normally this, just the general sense of time for a change, you can squeak out a victory.

But you have to govern for four years. Can you just re-run that campaign of grievance and the kind of white working-class identity politics? Don't people ask where are the jobs? I mean some will come back, but what if they don't really?

BROWNSTEIN: First of all, I think that is their vision. I mean, there is nothing about this presidency that on any front is about broadening, right?

KRISTOL: Right.

BROWNSTEIN: There is nothing style or substance or policy that is about, in any way, speaking to the 54 percent of the country that did not vote for him. I think they believe that if they can hold what they have and energize it, they can win again. I think that is a debatable proposition.

KRISTOL: Yeah it seems like an odd proposition if you lost the popular vote by 3 million votes.

BROWNSTEIN: Right. And also not only that, but you got to 46. I mean, if you're the Democratic Party and two elections in a row you can't beat somebody who can't get above 46 – that's a double negative, but – If you can't beat somebody who is stuck at 46 or below, that would be surprising.

And I would not be surprised if by the time we get to 2020, somewhere, somehow in Trump Land there will be an effort to subtly encourage a third-party candidate because he has a better chance of winning as it gets lower.

So, the first point is he is not governing in a way that is making any effort to reach out to voters beyond his coalition.

Second, if you look at the polling, he is clearly reinforcing the doubts on the personal qualities and characteristics that existed, you know, in 2016. One-fifth of – you know, 20 percent of the voters – over 20 percent of the voters, roughly, said that he was not qualified because he did not have the

temperament to succeed. Over a – roughly a fourth of his voters said he did not have the temperament to succeed, but they wanted change. They didn't like Hillary Clinton. They wanted to take a chance.

The risk he faces is that particularly with those white-collar whites, he is making out – there's nothing happening that is making that better, let's put it that way. If you went into this election as an ambivalent Trump voter, and your ambivalence was less about policy than it was about the personal qualities, and whether this was someone who was really kind of suited to be the most powerful man in the world, I don't think there's a lot that's happened in the last five months that have reassured you.

KRISTOL: Right.

BROWNSTEIN: I mean, people still see him as, like, a disruptive force fighting for change. They like – a lot of people like that. But they see him as erratic. They see him as impulsive. They see him as ill-informed. He is not reassuring.

And then what is on the governing front probably the most complex challenge is he did run as a different kind of Republican to – you know, to paraphrase Bill Clinton. And he basically said I am going to champion the interest of working-class communities across the board. And, you know, in some ways, that collided with Democrats: on immigration, say, or on "I am going to unleash the police to protect…"

KRISTOL: Right, right.

BROWNSTEIN: But there were areas where it – the collision was greater with Republicans. And that is on protecting programs that help lower middle class, you know, working class and older voters.

Did you know that two-thirds of everybody in the country between the ages of 45 and 64 are white? And Donald Trump dominated among whites 45 to 64. They are, by far, the biggest losers in the healthcare bill. Right? Older, working-age adults in the last two decades before – And the healthcare bill, I think, is the perfect little emblem of the challenge he's facing integrating his working-class, nationalist populism into the traditional more small-government, Ayn Rand-ian conservatism of, say, Ryan and – I don't know what McConnell is. McConnell's just, McConnell is "get to 50."

KRISTOL: Right, right.

BROWNSTEIN: So the healthcare bill is a perfect model of the challenge he faces because the congressional party has steered it in a way that reflects more traditional Republican goals than Trump talked about, but which violate exactly what he promised during the campaign: that he's to protect these lower middle-income and working-class,   and older white voters. You look at the premium numbers, you look at the Medicaid numbers, you look at the states that are dealing with the opiate crisis.

KRISTOL: Right.

BROWNSTEIN: They are all among the biggest losers in this plan, and that's –

I think taxes and the budget raise similar issues. Can you be truly a working-class populist party, and – At a time when many of those voters support government activism? Can you integrate that? – as long as it benefits them. Everybody in the Republican coalition is fine with cutting food stamps. Okay? Even though those now benefit – you go to Kentucky or West Virginia, I mean, who's on food stamps?

KRISTOL: Right.

BROWNSTEIN: They're Trump voters.

KRISTOL: Right.

BROWNSTEIN: So I think this is the big structural challenge for governing.

KRISTOL: And you could also argue, at least I've argued, that it's – like, the healthcare bill in particular, but one could imagine the same will be true of tax reform, if that ever develops – it's sort of the worst of both worlds. I mean, it's not a success – it doesn't actually reward the Trump voters, the populace, the working class whites. In a practical sense, it hurts them, if anything, or at least can be portrayed as hurting them.

BROWNSTEIN: Right.

KRISTOL: But it doesn't actually embody any great conservative principal either, of rolling back government or limiting government. Or markets. You know, "We're finally going to have a healthcare system that – an insurance that works. Like car insurance works fine, right? But it's not attached to employers." You can imagine a bold kind of free market agenda. It would be risky, but it might have appeal across, actually across class lines. But they don't – they've sort of gotten neither with this now.

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah, the only –

KRISTOL: It strikes me as it's –

BROWNSTEIN: The only part of it that is more conventional Republican really is on the Medicaid side. It's rolling back Medicaid.

KRISTOL: Yes.

BROWNSTEIN: I mean, Republicans, Ronald Reagan talked about block-granting Medicaid. Bush proposed, W. proposed to block grant Medicaid.

But the difference, I think the difference is that, again, it goes to this larger question: Obama, the ACA, as you know, raised eligibility for Medicaid up the income ladder for the first time, really, into the lower middle-income working population. At precisely the same time, Trump was lowering the Republican coalition's reach down the income – And the two lines now overlap.

I mean, you look at a state like West Virginia, or Ohio, or Kentucky, or Maine, and who is going to get hurt by the Medicaid rollback? It is older and lower-middle income voters. And in those states, those are whites who vote for Donald Trump. And that is a really perilous – in terms of 2020, I mean, Democrats – I think Democrats feel that if Trump reneges on his promises to protect Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid, that would be the biggest vulnerability to the working-class whites.

KRISTOL: It's perilous if it happens – I think it's much more perilous, just politically, if it becomes law because things start to happen. I mean, some of them don't happen until after 2020.

BROWNSTEIN: Right, right. No.

KRISTOL: But at least it's sort of, like, this is going to happen. This is the law of the land.

If it [the health care bill] fails, people vaguely remember, and –

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah, right. They [Republicans] are probably better off if it fails. Yeah.

KRISTOL: Yeah. I think – and then Trump can still be their champion. And there's no actual concrete thing to put in the scales against him.

BROWNSTEIN: In the ads, yeah.

KRISTOL: What about the two parties? I mean, so the picture we've painted here, which is very interesting – I mean, the parties are getting more like themselves, so to speak, and more entrenched. And the two Americas are growing more apart. Well, first, let's say a word about that geographically. How does that affect the House and the Senate and all that?

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah. I mean, look, one of the biggest advantages Republicans have is that the modern Democratic coalition is overly concentrated into a few big places. You know, we were talking about it before. I mean, Democrats have won the popular vote in six of the past seven presidential elections, which no party has ever done since 1828. I mean, so they have a big coalition, nationally, fueled by these demographic changes.

But even over that period, even before you get to Donald Trump, over those, what, the last 26 years, they will have held the house for six years.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's amazing.

BROWNSTEIN: And in the Senate, they – you know, we've had the Senate about evenly divided. I think it's 14 and 12 over that same period. And, you know, essentially the story is that the demographic and economic changes that are benefitting Democrats are not universally distributed around the country.

And in the places that are not being reshaped by diversity, whether it's states, interior states, you know, like the Montanas and the Kansases and so forth. Or even more pointedly, within states, as you get outside of those dense metropolitan areas that are diverse, post-industrial, secular, you know, pick the adjective – their ability to compete has kind of fallen off the table. So even though they have –

And in essence, what happened, I think, in 2016 – one of the things that happened in 2016 is the problems, the geographic problems. that Democrats have had in the House and the Senate extended to the Electoral College. For the first time.

KRISTOL: That's a great way of putting it. They kind of drew an inside straight in the electoral college, but it was based on, you might say, the House –

BROWNSTEIN: It was based on what we had seen, on the House map.

KRISTOL: And that's much more important, what you've been describing, than gerrymandering, right?

BROWNSTEIN: I believe. I believe.

KRISTOL: Gerrymandering is –

BROWNSTEIN: It's kind of the icing on the cake. I mean, gerrymandering makes it worse, but the sorting and the concentration of Democrats –

KRISTOL: And how much of it is Voting Rights Act, majority-minority districts? A little bit of that too?

BROWNSTEIN: A little bit. A little bit of that in the South.

KRISTOL: Too much concentration of Democrats in inner cities.

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah, too much concentration. Yeah, I mean, Democrats have all of these districts that they win, you know, by enormous margins. But, I mean, the core problem – the geographic concentration is part of it also.

But realistically, this is where the view that you can survive without any competiveness in the white working-class becomes more problematic. Because you can – they have proven you can win the White House with pretty miserable numbers among blue-collar whites. But you really can't win the House on a sustained basis, because, you know, again, the diversity hasn't dispersed enough to make it possible to win the House on a regular basis. Unless you can be a little more competitive in places that are still predominantly white, predominately working-class, and pretty religious.

KRISTOL: And in off-year elections, they vote more too, so –

BROWNSTEIN: They vote more too.

KRISTOL: And it is amazing – Just one last point on looking backwards in a way. I mean, in '04, as I recall, Ohio was the state we waited for. I don't think – you know, it wasn't called until 2:00 a.m. or something. Kerry didn't concede until the next morning. And the other state that was super close was Iowa.

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah.

KRISTOL: I think it was 5,000 votes. I think Bush won it, actually, anyway.

BROWNSTEIN: Right. That was the one time in the last six.

KRISTOL: Ohio and Iowa in 2016 were plus, what, nine and 12 Republican or something

BROWNSTEIN: Just total, right. Just totally blew out the doors.

KRISTOL: And Ohio was contested. I mean –

BROWNSTEIN: Heavily contested. Heavily, heavily contested.

KRISTOL: Less than in Iowa. They kind of gave up on Iowa at some point.

BROWNSTEIN: Right, they kind of knew they were in trouble.

KRISTOL: That is really remarkable.

BROWNSTEIN: Right, it is.

And, you know, in the long run, I do believe that in the long run, the Democrats – Democratic future is more North Carolina, Florida, Georgia, Arizona, Nevada, and Colorado, than it is some of those Midwestern states because they are aging. They are not diversifying very much.

KRISTOL: They, the Midwestern states.

BROWNSTEIN: They, the Midwestern states are aging and remaining predominately white at a time when older whites are becoming more Republican and probably will continue to become more Republican. I mean, this treadmill idea. I don't think we know enough to say for sure, but the idea that as older, blue-collar, religious whites feel increasingly eclipsed, they increasingly look to the Republican Party as their kind of defender and savior, seems to be plausible.

So if that's the case, yes, over time, Democrats have to find a way to break through in the Sunbelt, and the answer to that, by the way, is pretty –

KRISTOL: And they will. I mean, North Carolina will be the next Virginia, and Arizona will be the next Colorado, or whatever metaphor you want.

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah, but the key to that is very straightforward. I mean, it is: two things. It's turning out somewhat more minorities. But the biggest thing is winning more college whites. Because they don't win as many college whites in the sun, some of those Sunbelt states, as they do in, like, Colorado: they win 52, 53 percent of college whites. It's pretty safe. Virginia, they win 44, and it's fine. They're now pretty safe in Virginia. I'd be shocked if they don't win the governor's race in Virginia this year.

But in North Carolina, that goes down to the high 30s. So it's not quite enough. And then in Georgia, it's in the 20s, and in Texas, it's in the 20s. They've got to get those up to the mid-30s probably. You win a third of college whites in Georgia and Texas, and you win them.

KRISTOL: Wow. That's interesting.

BROWNSTEIN: But they can't get there yet.

KRISTOL: Now this whole discussion – it seems to me that, you know, you described a picture of the two parties as they're getting more like themselves, more separate from each other. Consolidating their own supporters, and presumably this goes on, and it's somewhat evenly matched, not [INAUDIBLE] –

BROWNSTEIN: Right. It's pretty closely matched. Yeah.

KRISTOL: Pretty closely matched.

BROWNSTEIN: Republicans have this geographic advantage, and Democrats kind of have a demographic advantage. Yeah.

KRISTOL: Right. But somehow one – sometimes one looks at this whole system and thinks, I don't know, the parties are so stale. They're kind of – You've got Sanders and the Democrats. Trump and the Republicans. Maybe there'll be a breakup. What about a Macron possibility? A centrist-something? There is – there was sentiment in 2016 for a Bloomberg-type candidate. I mean, he polled, and he did pretty well, I think, in his polling, but not well enough he thought to run. I don't know. What about that? I mean, are we –

BROWNSTEIN: Right. I'm not – so this is a real – it's a great question, and I'm not smart enough to kind of see entirely around the corner of where this may go.

What we can say is we know, as we said, that all of the geographic and demographic sorting that goes back to the '60s, but certainly really accelerates in the '80s and '90s, it has moved to a point that seems – you know, how much further can it go, right? I mean, it –

KRISTOL: But also to the point that, as a governing matter, it ends up being un –

BROWNSTEIN: Un-governable.

KRISTOL: Unsatisfactory, even for partisans of both sides.

BROWNSTEIN: Well, among other things, we're now in the situation where every four years we tear up what happened in the previous four years. And we're, like, we're going to start over on energy and healthcare every four years? I mean that's a crazy way to run a big country.

You know, utilities invest in power plants that are supposed to last for 45 years. Would you build a power plant today on the assumption that Donald Trump has irrevocably changed the direction of policy and

that over the next 44, 45 years no one is going to care how much carbon you emit? I mean, who would make that investment?

So it's not a very functional system, but it has a lot of internal logic. There's a lot of centrifugal force in it. It's getting deeper and deeper. And Trump is a president who is perfectly comfortable with this environment and, in fact, is trying to reinforce it. And all of his attacks on the fake news are really, I think, about encouraging his voters to discount critical voices and look only at the sources that are, you know, complimentary to him. He's perfectly comfortable, as we said before, trying –

So there's a lot going on. But you look at this, and you say how can this go on? And you knew Herb Stein, and the famous Herb Stein rule. And he – what was it? Any trend that can't be sustained, won't be. I mean, essentially.

KRISTOL: Yeah, yeah. Things can't – Yeah, it's, like, welfare, I think. People on welfare was going up two percent every three years. And, of course, eventually you get to 100 percent. It's not going to go up –

BROWNSTEIN: You know, people watch the press conference in June in DC where John Kasich and John Hickenlooper were stood there condemning the Republican healthcare bill together. And people said, "Huh, that's kinda interesting, right?" I mean, how would that ticket do against Elizabeth Warren and Donald Trump?

KRISTOL: Right.

BROWNSTEIN: That would be the ultimate – that would be the Macron ticket: urban/suburban white-collar, reasonable, you know. Might make it easier for Trump to win by lowering the – you know, lowering the number.

But look, I do think that there are strains in both parties, right? Because you do have a Trump populism that is at odds with a kind of a more centrist, more white-collar Republicanism. And then you have a Sanders populism that is more at odds with a white-collar DLC-ish Democrat. And the minority vote is kind of a third force who don't really fit into either of those.

So yeah, I mean, the fissures – the thing could recombine in different ways because this is not very functional.

KRISTOL: Well, that's the thing. I think it's both getting – As you said, it's both an internal logic, but also an external illogic –

BROWNSTEIN: Illogic – right, it does, so –

KRISTOL: And somehow how does that all work out? I mean, with Trump especially, it sort of depends on results. And so if there's a semi-failed Trump – It seems to me the only way you get to a Macron thing is a semi-failed Trump presidency that's not failed enough to deny him re-nomination, so it's not LBJ in '68. But it's, you know, Carter or something like that. He gets primaried, but he survives, has his base, but the base is now –

BROWNSTEIN: Kasich. Kasich primaries him.

KRISTOL: Well, I don't know. Someone, yeah. But then the Democrats go left, I suppose.

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah, that's right. Right.

KRISTOL: For this scenario. Then I think there is a pretty – And maybe they've won the House in the meantime, and have done things in the House that look just –

BROWNSTEIN: Well, they've impeached Trump.

KRISTOL: – sort of wacky left. Yeah, they may have impeached Trump. And that is – maybe then you do have your sort of Pelosi/Warren Democrats and Trump Republicans.

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah. And then you have the – then you have a Kasich-centrist Democrat. It's not impossible to imagine, as John Anderson ran against Ronald Reagan in 1980, then ran as an Independent. I could imagine a world where John Kasich primaries Trump, gets very close to beating him in New Hampshire, which is a pretty white-collar electorate, you know, rallies kind of suburban Republicans but probably falls short in the end.

Although it is worth noting that now in the GOP primary, it is almost exactly 50/50 college and non-college. And the reason Donald Trump won over 17 other candidates is that he conciliated the non-college side –

KRISTOL: And that's compared to what? What did it use to be?

BROWNSTEIN: It would have been – well, I don't know going back that far. But it would have tilted – I mean, the college share is going up nationally. Like, for example, the Democratic primary, it's going up. And I think it's been – the blue-collar share has been holding and growing in the Republican side.

But Trump won an incredible share, basically half of all non-college Republicans in a field with 17 other candidates. No one won more than a third of the college Republicans. That's how he won: He consolidated one wing, and the other wing divided. That was the one sentence.

So I could imagine Kasich or Sasse, but more likely Kasich, running against Trump and doing pretty well, but not winning. And then if the Democrats went far enough left, saying all right, you know what? I'm going to go find the Bill Bradley or, you know, someone former – Bob Kerry, you know, pick out your name. These are former Democratic senators who are kind of centrist senators, and I'm going to run as a third-party candidate against Elizabeth Warren and Donald Trump.

KRISTOL: I mean, that would be an independent candidacy, which might have a shot.

BROWNSTEIN: It's hard.

KRISTOL: I mean, Perot was once at 35 percent and it looked like he might have a chance. It's difficult Whether that would then lead – I guess if you won, it might lead to an actual party.

BROWNSTEIN: Yes.

KRISTOL: I mean, do you think it happens in America, bottom-up? Things start happening at the state level –

BROWNSTEIN: Top-down.

KRISTOL: No, I do too.

BROWNSTEIN: I think that somebody wins the presidency and creates a party. The problem is – like, here's the problem: is that the states are so polarized now that you have the risk of finishing second everywhere. You finish second to the Democrat in California, and second to the Republican in Texas.

KRISTOL: I think that's what Bloomberg found when he polled this in 2016. I mean, privately, and his people – and they were serious about it. And I think he didn't run because he thought, ironically that he would elect Trump. He thought he would take votes from Hillary.

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah. And he might have been second in 30 states.

KRISTOL: Yes, exactly. But he never could quite figure out how he either wins the Electoral College or even forces it into the House –

BROWNSTEIN: Which doesn't do you any good because then you just elect Trump.

KRISTOL: Unless the Republicans are looking for an excuse not to. But, I mean, that would be complicated because they would select the one with the most popular vote. But, yeah –

BROWNSTEIN: No, but your instinct, I think, is right.

I mean it's hard for me to imagine – I don't know what the next act is – but it is hard to imagine that we keep doing this over the next 20, 25 years, before I go to the political press box in the sky. Hopefully a little more than 20. But I think that it's hard to imagine that we keep doing this. But it's also hard to see who coalesces the forces.

The best possibility is the scenario you described though. Trump, you know, holds on to primarily the blue-collar wing of the Republican Party that shares his fervor, the enemies that he arrays. The Democrats go left, and you have a very large number of white-collar – and not only whites but minorities in many cases, I think, who kind of feel like, "Eh, I don't know whether I fit in any of this." And that's a – you can imagine a scenario where a Kasich or Hickenlooper kind of thing could get 20, 25 percent of the vote, but can they win any states?

KRISTOL: And can they get 35 percent of that? Which is what you sort of need, to start winning states. Forty percent really. You know, that is the question. Well, that's an interesting speculation.

What else haven't we thought of? 2018? Do you have a particular view?

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah, so look, the challenge for Democrats is that among – in addition to the geographic challenge they face in the House, which is real. That's a big problem – they have a second problem, which is that they have this boom and bust coalition. They depend on young people and minorities, and they both, but especially young people, turn-out collapses. In the last two elections, from '08 to '10, and '12 to '14, turnout among 18 to 29 has dropped by more than half.

KRISTOL: Wow.

BROWNSTEIN: That's killer. I mean, the –

KRISTOL: So from the presidential to the off-year.

BROWNSTEIN: To the next midterm, has dropped by –

KRISTOL: Fewer than half of the same people vote.

BROWNSTEIN: And they're winning 50 – in a bad year, they win 57 percent of people under 30, and in a good year, they're now winning 60. Against Trump, they have potential to win 65 percent of voters under 30. And conversely, Trump's best group, as I said, are whites over 45. So if you look at the last several midterms, we see the share of the vote cast by young people fall from about 19 percent in the presidential to 12 percent in the midterm. And then the share cast by seniors goes up correspondingly.

KRISTOL: Right.

BROWNSTEIN: That can't happen again if Democrats are going to win the House. And, you know, this is the big debate. Has Trump activated that? And I think there is some evidence the answer is yes.

KRISTOL: What do you think from the special elections so far? This –

BROWNSTEIN: A lot of people turned out.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah, a lot of people – a lot –

KRISTOL: It seems to me like the Democrats are consistently picking up five, six, seven percent above the Hillary Clinton level.

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah, and the question is whether Republicans can replicate what they were able to do in Georgia 6, which was they turned out a lot of Republicans.

KRISTOL: Yeah, and not above the Hillary Clinton level, but above their previous levels –

BROWNSTEIN: Oh on the House levels, it's way up. Way up.

So I think, we know what people think pretty much. I don't think it's going to change that much by 2018. We know that Trump is still relatively strong in blue-collar white America. He has abysmal numbers among millennials. He has abysmal numbers among minorities. And he is under-performing any Republican ever – president ever, with college whites.

So I think that will be true a year from now. I don't think that's going to be really different a lot. I mean, it could be a little worse for him. It could be a little better. I don't think it's going to be that different.

So the question is two-fold. One, who comes out? And second, to what degree can the Republicans in vulnerable places – which are mostly these suburban white-collar places, separate themselves from Trump? Historically, over the modern era, as we've gotten more polarized, routinely, people approve of the president, 85 percent of them vote for his party's candidates in the House, 85 percent who disapprove vote against.

KRISTOL: Yeah, so if Trump's only at 38 or 40 percent, that's a negative indicator.

BROWNSTEIN: They should lose the House.

KRISTOL: They should lose the House. That's what I've been thinking too.

BROWNSTEIN: They should lose the House. Now, again, Democrats have this extra problem of turnout. But if he's at 38 or 40 and they don't lose the House, I think – or come – you know, get right on the 218, 219. Democrats have to win 24 seats. There are 23 Republicans in districts that Clinton carried. Most of them, two-thirds of them are in heavily white-collar, suburban districts.

You know, a Democrat gets from 38 percent against Tom Price to – what was it? – 48 percent for John Ossoff in the suburbs of Atlanta? If you're running Mike Hoffman in the suburbs of Denver or Pat Meehan in the suburbs of Philadelphia or Leonard Lance in the suburbs of New Jersey, you don't like that. Because Southern suburbanites are more conservative than the suburbanites we're talking about there. So they have a shot. No guarantee. It really depends on who votes.

KRISTOL: And then, of course, the dynamics. This is why the next three years are going to be very interesting in their own, crazy way. And maybe they're – I mean, I don't know if they're as Trump-dependent as we've been saying. Maybe they are though, ultimately. As he's the president. The presidents are important in American politics. But, I mean, of course, what happens with Mueller? Is there an impeachment or not? I mean –

BROWNSTEIN: Absolutely. That is a huge, you know –

KRISTOL: A huge wildcard. People are underestimating it. I mean, either he reports presumably in early mid-2018, I'm guessing –

BROWNSTEIN: Yes.

KRISTOL: I think it would be soon. Not late 2018. Either he reports to congress, "Yes, there are things you should consider for impeachment." À la Ken Starr. Or he says, "No," and that changes the dynamic an awful lot. You know, just think about that.

BROWNSTEIN: If he reports that – you know, I could imagine a scenario in which he accepts the Justice Department memos from the Watergate era and 2000. Twice the Justice Department has written OLC, Office of Legal Counsel. These don't have the force of law, but they are internal policy, that a sitting president cannot be indicted criminally.

KRISTOL: Right.

BROWNSTEIN: So it is entirely possibly, to me, anyway, that being a good, smart prosecutor, he says, "Look, I can't indict the president, so I'm not going to answer the question of whether he committed a *criminal* act because it's meaningless. What I can tell you is he did these things that you should be looking at."

KRISTOL: Right. Well, that's what the referral to Congress is really. I mean Starr didn't tell them to impeach. He said, "You need to consider these things."

BROWNSTEIN: Right. But, no. Starr did say that he thought he committed criminal acts, actually.

KRISTOL: Oh, is that right?

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah. But – anyway, but if they – if he drops that in their lap and they do nothing, you know, I think that's a real gamble, obviously, with these voters who are ambivalent, at best, about Trump.

KRISTOL: What if he says, however, that, you know, "Michael Flynn did X and shouldn't have. And maybe there's some criminal indictments with Manafort." I don't mean to slander people here on this show, but whatever, you know? And that's all possible. But basically nothing. Trump may have been imprudent. He may have been, you know, reckless. But he didn't quite reach the level of real obstruction or real collusion. Then impeachment's off. Does that help?

BROWNSTEIN: I think Democrats are probably – I don't know what you think. I think if Democrats win the House and their first act is impeach Trump, that would be a big mistake.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I totally – I think the more the election of 2018, or even 2020, is about impeachment – this is sort of weirdly contrary [and] ironic, but it's worse for the Democrats.

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah.

KRISTOL: If 2018, even, is a referendum on impeachment, I think a lot of people will get nervous, "Like, really? We just elected him."

BROWNSTEIN: And a lot of Republicans will come out. Right.

KRISTOL: Republicans will come out. It's, like, "I don't know. I mean, he's maybe not – I may want to vote against him in 2020." I could imagine my neighbors in Northern Virginia saying, "But do they really want Nancy Pelosi's House to impeach him in 2019?" That's a little –

BROWNSTEIN: I mean, I can imagine, without too much trouble, a pretty plausible two-front argument against Trump in 2020, for the Democrats. On the one hand, you basically go to white-collar America, and you say, "This guy was every bit as unqualified as you were afraid. Plus he's leading us backward." I mean, he's trying to restore the economy of 1955, and, you know, he's abandoning climate. He's abandoning clean energy jobs. He's closing off the world. I mean, there's a pretty clear case.

And then on the other track, you go to blue-collar America, and you say what they were – what they talked about in 2015, "He is a false tribune. He doesn't really have your interests at heart. He's a plutocrat. I mean, he cut taxes for rich people and gave you scraps. He took away your healthcare," if that's –

That seems, to me, you know, a pretty plausible two-track case against him, and he'll obviously have his counter arguments. You don't really need to, you know, kind of feed the beast by impeaching him.

KRISTOL: But. Then Mueller might report, then –

BROWNSTEIN: Well, and then – and look – and then Mueller reports. Then you may have to. And also, the internal logic of everything we've been talking about is that they will impeach him.

KRISTOL: And the last election, the only midterm election we've ever, I'd say, had where impeachment was front and center.

BROWNSTEIN: Republicans did better. First time since 1834, I think. First time since 1834 that the president's party gained seats in a second midterm.

KRISTOL: So wouldn't that be bizarre, you know, kind of weird contrary thing. But I'm not sure that would happen, but who knows? It's going to be a very interesting three or four years. We'll have to have this conversation maybe every year.

BROWNSTEIN: Every year, yeah.

KRISTOL: We'll update people on this, but this has been fascinating.

BROWNSTEIN: Thank you, Bill.

KRISTOL: Terrific, historical perspective. And thought-provoking in all kinds of ways, and so Ron, thanks for joining us today.

BROWNSTEIN: Thanks for having me.

KRISTOL: And thanks for joining us on *Conversations*.

[END]