

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Conversations with Bill Kristol

Guest: Paul Begala, Political Adviser and Commentator
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Taped May 9, 2018

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I: On the Democratic Party (0:15 – 41:39)

KRISTOL: Hi. I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome to Conversations. I'm very pleased to be joined today by my friend Paul Begala, veteran Democratic strategist, key architect to the Clinton victory in '92, and senior aide in the Clinton White House and a very keen observer of all things Democratic and Republican.

BEGALA: Thanks. Thanks, Bill. Great to see you again.

KRISTOL: Good to see you. So I thought –

BEGALA: And we dressed alike. We wore the uniforms.

KRISTOL: It's new unity in Donald Trump's America. Trump creates strange, you know, bedfellows.

BEGALA: Bipartisanship.

KRISTOL: Right. Exactly. So we're speaking, just to locate it, in about early, mid-May 2018. Well, what's going on in the Democratic – what's up with Republicans? I'm interested in that and we can talk about that too, but what about the Democratic Party? What's the effect of Trump? What's the response to Trump? Where do we go this year? And then later on we'll get where do we go in 2020.

BEGALA: You know, the challenge – first, thanks. Thanks for having me here. We've done this once before and it's always fascinating and I love doing these things with you.

The challenge for the Democrats, and I think they're rising to it, is to look beyond Trump. That is to say there's two ways you can respond to the Trump presidency. You can say oh, it was a fluke, it was a black swan, and it was. You know, but for 77,447 voters in Pennsylvania –

KRISTOL: That number's not sticking in your mind for some reason.

BEGALA: Not that it's stuck in my head.

KRISTOL: Yeah, right.

BEGALA: But Pennsylvania plus Wisconsin plus Michigan, all three states combined, 77,447 votes. That's not a sellout at a Penn State or Michigan or University of Wisconsin football game. So you could dismiss it. I think Democrats should not and are not – first off, there's enormous consequences. But so how do you answer it?

Well, you – right now the lava is exploding and literally in Hawaii as we speak Kilauea is erupting. So we know how to deal with that. We know how to cover it. Ooh, look at all that lava. And Democrats know how to decry it. "Well, we're the anti-lava party. Lava's destructive and it's awful." Well, what I want Democrats to do, and I think they are, is look at the subterranean pressures that are causing that, right?

And I think there's two. There is – in geology there's compressional pressure where one plate is on top of another. And I liken that to the income and wealth and opportunity inequality. And that creates enormous pressure in your party and mine, enough to cause a fissure that can make an explosion like Trump.

There's a second kind – and I believe in plate tectonics because I'm a liberal. I like science. The second kind is the plates pull apart, tensional pressure. And I think that's what's happening culturally, right. And it's advancements, which I love on gay rights and women's rights. But it leaves some people behind. It really worries people.

KRISTOL: Immigration.

BEGALA: Immigration especially, right. So those two things are going on at once. So the Democrats have to I think figure out how we're going to deal with those subterranean pressures. I say I'm hopeful that they're doing it.

And I'm confident they are because of how they're running in these midterms. They're not just running around saying, "Oh, I hate Trump, I'm against lava." They're really trying to speak to the pain that's caused that and to get back to middle class economic, and middle class cultural, and middle class values that the Democratic Party I think even created. My party created the middle class. We created the 8-hour day and the 40-hour workweek. We created the weekend.

So I like that. And I think that's what's happening in 2018 is the Democrats are trying to find a productive response. It's not enough to just say I'm anti-Trump. It's necessary but not sufficient to resist. And I've been all around the country. I no longer do it for a living. So I do it for love and fun and volunteer. But I've gone around the country and campaigned with some of these challengers. And to a person they're running *for* something, not simply against Trump.

And I think that's really critical to my party. And what the – because the districts are such that for the Democrats to take back the House, very moderate districts, even conservative districts. So you're seeing the Democratic Party responding to Trump not by going off to an extreme but by saying well, if you're going to abandon the sensible center, we're going to capture it. And that may well be that if the Democrats take back the house, that will be the reason why.

KRISTOL: What would make you doubt or make you less confident that they're going in this direction? Are there particular states or primary races coming up or issues, focuses where you would say they're going off a little bit not in the direction I want them to go?

BEGALA: There are a few places where the Democrats are having primaries even in really conservative districts where we'll be lucky to win. Normally if you're in a really tough district, not very many people want to run.

KRISTOL: Right.

BEGALA: There's been such an outpouring. This has been a blessing with Trump being in the presidency. There's an outpouring on the progressive side. Activist groups, there was no such thing as Indivisible just months ago, you know, 15, 20 months ago.

And I think that's been terrific. The question is will the Democrats tear themselves apart in these primaries? So far they have not. For me the model is Virginia. The first off-year election after Trump, and the establishment Democrat, Ralph Northam, who is the incumbent lieutenant governor endorsed by every single Democrat in Richmond in the House of Delegates, in the State Senate, statewide elected. Every congressman who took a position was for Northam.

Well, that's fine. Then comes Tom Perriello, former Obama aide, former congressman from the Charlottesville area. He's running on a Bernie Sanders single-payer health care message. And they had a huge clash and they had a titanic primary. Largest turnout I've ever seen, and the moderate wins by 9 or 10 points. Well, what happens then? Perriello, to his great credit, busts his tail for the rest of the year campaigning for the more moderate guy.

Not only does all the statewide Democrats win, they sweep in more Democrats in the House of Delegates than anybody has in a hundred years. That's the model.

It's not simply enough for moderates to say well, moderates should win, or liberals to say that progressives should win. Then they have to actually come back together. And so far – we haven't had very many examples – but so far the early indicators are that they're willing to come back together. Not because Democrats are better or more cohesive or more moral or more forgiving or more fraternal; it's because nothing unites the people of earth like a threat from Mars. And to Democrats Trump is a Martian.

KRISTOL: And so what would be the threat just in 2018 from your point of view? I mean I suppose a focus on impeachment.

BEGALA: Right.

KRISTOL: Yeah. Talk about that a little bit. Can they avoid that? I mean –

BEGALA: We've lived through it. They can.

KRISTOL: I mean Trump seems to me to somewhat cleverly on his part want to make the 2018 –

BEGALA: Right.

KRISTOL: Most Republicans think that's crazy. Why aren't they running on their record? I actually think Trumps being a little clever like a fox here maybe, right? If he makes the 2018 thing about do you want me impeached or not – I mean that's leaving aside what Mueller finds –

BEGALA: Right.

KRISTOL: But in a way that rallies Republicans and –

BEGALA: Absolutely.

KRISTOL: – gets Democrats sounding more strident than you'd like them to.

BEGALA: Absolutely. I think that I would never do anything to minimize the Mueller Russia investigation. It may well take down this entire presidency. But I also will do nothing to politicize it.

KRISTOL: Right.

BEGALA: The investigation is going on. It is run by a very credible lifelong Republican and prosecutor. We have no idea what he's got. Maybe Trump's perfectly innocent. He's not acting like it, but maybe he is.

The last thing that Democrats need to do for our constitution but also for their party is to pre-judge. So I am completely frustrated with people who are running ads in favor of impeachment. And those tend to not be people who are actually running for office now. It's a billionaire in California, Tom Steyer, who seems intent on signing up people for impeachment before the investigation is concluded.

And I think it would be a terrible mistake. But I've talked to enough of these Democrats that they're not running on it and they're not hearing it. You know what they're running on? The tax cut, Trump's most important accomplishment. Conor Lamb ran that special election in Pennsylvania running at the tax cut, against the tax cut, and he won. He not only won –

KRISTOL: With a standard Democratic "it's a giveaway to the wealthy and corporate interests" kind of message.

BEGALA: Right. And I want to cut taxes for the middle class. And I want the wealthy to pay their fair share. You know, 83 percent of the benefits of that tax cut go to one percent of us. And it's not the poorest one percent and it's not the one percent serving in the military. And it's not the most vulnerable one percent. It's the wealthiest one percent.

So I like that Conor Lamb went right at it. He was so successful that even the Republicans stopped advertising on it. So he won the tactical battle over the tax cuts. Democrats are running saying here's the taxes that I want. I want to reward work, not wealth. I want to encourage more folks to go back to work and to join the middle class.

So the tax bill, which is not terribly popular. And then when the Democrats run, they can win. I've seen it. But also health care, which has in the last few cycles been won by the Republicans.

KRISTOL: Right.

BEGALA: People were very worried about Obamacare and they didn't like it until now that it's threatened. And you know the joke I've used is it was Obamacare and people didn't like it. And then we got rid of Obama and now it's just care.

KRISTOL: Yeah, right.

BEGALA: And they like it. And so Democrats defending Obamacare, in particular the premium supports that help a lot of middle class families, and protecting Medicaid or Medicare, which the Republicans have signaled, as a result of their tax cut, we're going to have to make cuts in Medicaid, Medicare, even Social Security.

Those are the meat and potato Democratic issues that voters recognize my party for and that I think in some ways the Democrats got away from. And I think they run on that and they are – that's why I'm bullish on 2018.

KRISTOL: And you think they are. I mean you think from Pelosi on down and Schumer on down the signals to all the candidates are, "run on this." And you think they're – I mean what could derail it?

BEGALA: I can say with assurance, with certainty, I've talked to Pelosi. I'm lucky that way. I've talked to the people running these campaigns. I'm out of that business.

KRISTOL: Right.

BEGALA: But I know that that's what they're saying. I know that Nancy Pelosi is opposed to impeachment.

By the way, she was opposed to it when she took over the House when George W. Bush was president. I'm sure you recall, but there was this nascent movement on the left. "Bush is a war criminal. Obviously Cheney's a war criminal. We have to..." She cut it off. She shut it down instantly, immediately. "No. We're actually going to do things to help the middle class."

And, you know, she's as Democratic, as partisan a Democrat as you can be, but not transgressing those norms. Simply because Trump transgresses norms, it doesn't mean that my side should.

KRISTOL: What would be a sign of ascendancy of the left, I mean of the Sanders way? Would there be – I mean Cuomo losing in New York? I mean would there be sort of a moment that people would sort of –

BEGALA: That's interesting. I don't see that, but stranger things have happened. But no, I think that right now, 2018 –

KRISTOL: So you feel like 2018 is –

BEGALA: – there's real unity. The moderate and the progressive wing are working very well together. There are some tough primaries. The challenge will be can they come back together afterwards the way that Northam and Perriello did? So far I think they will, and I think it really bodes well for 2018.

The question then is –

KRISTOL: Do you think it's strong because – do you think – let's say the economy continues decently pretty strong for the rest of 2018. How much do you think that affects the off-year election?

BEGALA: So far people, they are much more worried about the future, and they really don't like this tax cut. And so usually a strong economy really benefits the incumbent party, but there's still a terrible sense in this country, a terrific sense depending on your perspective, that a lot of people are left out and left behind. And there's a lot of people who believe that your zip code determines your outcome, like where you're born. And that's not the American dream.

So I don't see the strong economy re-electing a Republican majority. The districts favor the Republicans. The economy is pretty robust. And yet there is still this powerful sense that we need to change, we need to check. But we also need a return to the middle class.

This is where Trump has blown his opportunity. I'm not a fan, but because he essentially is a third-party candidate.

KRISTOL: Right.

BEGALA: Right. This is why Republicans like you or real Republicans don't like him. Here's my counterfactual on Trump, he's sworn in on a Saturday. Largest crowd in history apparently. [Laughs]. The next day 3.5 million people are in the streets, liberal activists, Democratic, the progressive wing of my party, largest mass demonstrations in American history. He hasn't even done anything yet.

What if on the Monday instead of going to the CIA and insulting them, what if on his first full day, workday as President, he had introduced that trillion dollar infrastructure plan he campaigned on? He would have had Chuck Schumer, Bob Casey, you know, Claire McCaskill, a lot of Democrats on his side because we

too think there's a terrific need to rebuild America, to put working class Americans back to work, black, white, Asian, and Latino.

And he could have remade American politics because that still would not have solved the problem of the activists who hate him for good reason. So you would have divided your opposition. The Republicans would have gone along with it. They've gone along with a lot worse than an infrastructure package. The Chamber of Commerce wants infrastructure. He could have completely remade this.

He got elected mostly by the American middle class. I believe the Democrats are going to be resurgent because he's abandoned that middle class. And the things that he's doing are, interestingly, almost designed to hurt his voters.

Here's one to watch. Let's watch Senator Deb Fischer, popular, able, no scandal, she's a senator from Nebraska. She should be re-elected in a walk, one of the most reliably Republican states. If in fact these tariffs go through, they're like a heat-seeking missile at rural America. I mean it is like – the Chinese are not stupid. They're going to retaliate where it hurts Trump the most.

KRISTOL: Right.

BEGALA: They're not going to target artisanal cheeses from Brooklyn.

KRISTOL: Right. Right.

BEGALA: Right. They're going to target – I was just days ago in Montana, a blood red state. You know what the farmers there are saying. Corn, beans, sugar beets. That's what Xi is targeting. That's what China – that's what they think Xi is going to target, which hurts them.

So you may even see really red states, senators in trouble if these tariffs kick in, and in fact the Chinese retaliate and damage our farm economy so desperately.

So I think that's the tragedy of Trump as a substantive and political matter is he was poised because of his remarkable support from the white working class to remake politics, and, you know, he's completely failed I think. And I think that gives the Democrats a chance to come back.

KRISTOL: So what's the most likely outcome in 2018?

BEGALA: I think it's amazing to say given the districts, but I think it's better than 50/50. More likely than not the Democrats retake the House.

It's still not more likely than not that they take the Senate. I just think those states are so very difficult. So many races the Democrats are defending in very difficult states. That's when you'll know there's a colossal wave, which is why you're right that the President is cagey in raising impeachment because to get a wave, you need amplitude.

And what happens, waves don't just happen because the party in opposition is excited. It's the party in power has to be depressed. That's how you get that amplitude is a low base and a high crest.

And we saw this coming. Here's a canary in the coal mine. In 2010, September 20th more or less President Obama goes to Maryland to a town hall meeting. Now, he's had his hands full. He's trying to save the American economy. He's trying to save the auto industry, trying to unwind these wars. He goes to Maryland and he has a town hall meeting and there's a woman there who's like the embodiment of my party. She's maybe 35, an African American woman. She was a veteran of the military and the CFO of a veteran services group. Highly educated, service oriented, African American woman in Maryland. Okay.

That's like – that's my party. And you know what she said? She said, "Sir, I'm just tired of defending you." Now, she didn't say I quit. She didn't say I want Paul Ryan to take over. She's not going to switch teams, but she just said I'm tired of defending you. He was doing so much – I think all good but whatever – that he was wearing out his supporters, and it was just too much.

I wonder if this president, who is a whirling dervish, I think some of his people, even his supporters are like enough.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

BEGALA: Enough with the tweets. Enough. And so since he's not on the ballot and, you know, he's trying to – they can stay home. They can very easily stay home. A lot of really passionate Trump supporters could just lose a little bit of that passion. That's when you'll know.

If you start hearing, and I do – my friends who are pro Trump saying "God, if he would just throw away the twitter machine. If he would just shut up for a few days." And yet he can't.

KRISTOL: I mean that – I think, that is for people like me – The reluctant Trump supporters who have stuck with him more than I would wish over the past two years, but I would say for me that's the November 7th, the day after election day question. Do they want him for another four years?

BEGALA: Right.

KRISTOL: I think at that point the dynamics on the Republican side might change a lot. But just to get back to before then, I mean for me, the Senate is very interesting. I mean you could imagine Democrats picking up two, three, four seats I think: Arizona, Nevada, maybe Tennessee, maybe one of the others even.

The question is what happens in the states where Trump had huge margins?

BEGALA: Right.

KRISTOL: Because if you have nationalized election about Trump, which I suppose we're going to have to some degree. I mean he is the biggest issue really, right. Doesn't that help the Republican challengers in Missouri, Indiana, North Dakota?

BEGALA: North Dakota, West Virginia.

KRISTOL: Maybe Montana. Yeah.

BEGALA: Yes. And Montana. But so far it's not.

KRISTOL: Well, that's what's hard to tell I guess. Yeah.

BEGALA: Democrats do not and should not want to make this simply a referendum on Trump.

KRISTOL: Right.

BEGALA: We've had enough conversations about Trump.

KRISTOL: But Trump can sort of make it a referendum on Trump in a way, right, if he screams and yells enough.

BEGALA: I think what their line should be is Donald Trump is not on the ballot, but your health care is.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

BEGALA: Your job is. Your farm is. Your Medicaid is.

KRISTOL: I will save that for you and you can't count on the Republicans.

BEGALA: Right.

KRISTOL: So, ironically, they campaign more against the Republican congressional agenda than against Trump.

BEGALA: Yes, absolutely.

KRISTOL: Yeah. It will be interesting to see if they can pull that off.

BEGALA: The Democrats have to win in districts that Trump carried. And telling voters you're stupid is not a winning message for the Democrats. We've tried that.

KRISTOL: Yeah. Well –

BEGALA: Going to good people who I think were in a lot of pain and the pain is often expressed in anger. They turned to Trump to be a wrecking ball. And going to them and saying you screwed up my country, you're horrible, you're a racist, you're stupid, they tend not to like that.

KRISTOL: Right.

BEGALA: So I think it's then saying look, I get that. As my old boss used to say, I feel your pain. Now let me tell you the threat that this tax cut poses to your Social Security retirement. I can save it. And that is something Democrats have credibility on. So I think it's a far better message than just hating on Trump.

KRISTOL: And if a Mueller Report comes out in the summer and it does have genuine problematic stuff for the President that would lead legitimately, let's just say to at least consideration of impeachment, how much does that then become the dominant question in the fall, you know, are you for or against impeaching Trump?

BEGALA: I think that that's not where – I don't think that should be an electoral issue. I really don't. It will come up. I suppose it hasn't really yet on the campaign trail.

KRISTOL: Yeah. Interesting to see whether the Democrats can actually keep it from being one and whether Trump just doesn't make it one. I guess I come back to that. If I'm Trump, I go into Missouri and say you know what, you wanted me to be president and Claire McCaskill is trying to, you know, end, I don't know, end my presidency or something like that. Or she's just kneejerk anti-Trump and I need Josh Hawley there to help me. But maybe that doesn't work if the agenda itself isn't that popular.

BEGALA: And if the Democrats themselves don't play into that.

KRISTOL: Right.

BEGALA: And very often Democrats have played into Trump's agenda. They are not on this and they will not I believe, having talked to them. Now they have on other things, right. Trump is great about throwing out shiny – he would have been a great bass fisherman.

KRISTOL: So give a good example of where –

BEGALA: Colin Kaepernick, the football player who kneels during the National Anthem. Okay.

KRISTOL: Right.

BEGALA: By the way, that's a reverential gesture. It's not one I would do. I just wouldn't. It's not how I'm wired. I love my country, revere the flag. My father was buried under that flag. I get it.

But I also respect peaceful reverential protest. I mean taking a knee is not exactly a middle finger. It's a very reverential way. In fact, he was advised by a Green Beret that that would be a respectful reverential way to protest.

So anyway, he does this and we can have this discussion. That's not what Donald Trump wants, right. So he attacks the football players. Democrats grab the bait and now all of a sudden we're the party of people disrespecting the flag.

Well no, wait a minute. Can we get back to like middle class jobs?

KRISTOL: Yeah. Yeah.

BEGALA: We shut down the government over DACA. It was a mistake. We care about DACA. We care about these Dreamers, these kids who come here through no fault of their own. But shut down the whole government? Really? For 800,000 young people in a country of 320 million. That was Trump beating the Democrats into doing something that it was seen I think as extreme and ill advised.

So we've had several examples. He banned transgender troops.

You know, I just think that Democrats are learning to keep their eyes on the prize, focus on the main thing, not allow Mr. Trump to set the tempo, as the military folks say, right. Don't set the tempo, don't set the terms; we're going to set the tempo and the terms. And that's I think a much wiser strategy.

KRISTOL: Do you think the electoral – the senators and congressman, candidates can control that or do you get sort of the cultural left just kind of screams and yells and it sort of overwhelms everything in terms of what people see? I mean I guess that would be the question.

BEGALA: Right. That will be the interesting thing to watch.

KRISTOL: Right.

BEGALA: So far, no.

KRISTOL: Do people in Missouri think it's Clair McCaskill, or the New York Times, they're voting for? If you know what I mean.

BEGALA: Right. But I think so far we haven't seen that. We just haven't. And in fact in many ways if there are sort of out-of-state extremists coming to Missouri, like West Virginia or something, that actually allows the Democrats to say, well actually that's not for me.

They can push off against their own party in a way that they're very comfortable doing. You don't get to be a senator from West Virginia, Montana, North Dakota, Missouri, or Indiana without being comfortable pushing off against parts of your own party.

KRISTOL: So what does it look like after November 6, 2018? So let's assume Democrats control the House by 10 seats or 15. Republicans maybe hold the Senate by one or two. Then what happens? How does that play into 2020?

BEGALA: Right. It goes one of two ways. Either they do what I would not advise which is politicize impeachment and spend all their time trying to get rid of Trump, which is not going to happen. I mean he may fall of his own potential criminality but not because Democrats are pursuing impeachment.

That's one option and it's a live option. I think it's less likely.

I think what they'll do is what we did, Bill, when you were in the White House. I was working for Dick Gephardt, the majority leader, before I went to work for Bill Clinton. And the Democrats on the Hill had a strategy when George H.W. Bush was president going into his re-election: pass popular bills that the president will veto. Raise the minimum wage. The Democrats actually passed a very good campaign reform bill, which we couldn't pass under Clinton because they knew he'd sign it.

KRISTOL: Right, right, right.

BEGALA: So it was a free vote, but they passed a lot of stuff that they knew the president would veto. [crosstalk] family medical leave –

KRISTOL: They passed some stuff he signed, too.

BEGALA: They did. But going into the election –

KRISTOL: Americans with Disabilities Act.

BEGALA: Right. That was before –

KRISTOL: The Clean Air Act, which was '91 I guess – well, '90 or '91. Yeah.

MEGALA: Right, '90, '91. You got into '92 and they passed Family Medical Leave. They passed, as I recall, campaign finance reform, I think minimum wage.

But this is what the Democrats should do now, right. If they have the House, maybe even the Senate, they should actually govern. They should actually treat this like it's on the level.

KRISTOL: Well, that's – I'd say you're – I mean I think this is intelligent advice and all the Democrats watching this can take it if they wish, but I would say if you talk to most Democrats that I've talked to, but maybe I'm not talking to the actual candidates but sort of the echo chamber, let's say the Washington, D.C. liberal echo chamber is all about "whoa, when we take over the house, the investigations, Scott Pruitt is not going to get away with this at EPA and Trump's not going to get – Jared's not going to get away with that." I'm not even saying that's wrong, incidentally, to have some oversight.

BEGALA: Right.

KRISTOL: But you could imagine that drowning out what you would like to have be dominant, right?

BEGALA: You could. You could. They should not walk away from oversight, and I do think that there's a lot going on that people need to uncover. But there is a place for that. There's a silo for that. And there are able people, we hope, to take over those committees, who can look into it and if their manner is judicious, if it's thorough and fair, I think that's great. I think it's badly needed.

But that cannot be the substance. That can't be the *reason* to take over the House. It can't. It's simply to stop what I believe is some remarkably corrupt activity going on in the executive branch. We actually have to understand that there's a vast country out there whose needs are being ignored.

And not only are these guys fleecing you; they're ignoring the fact that the roads and bridges are crumbling. They're ignoring the fact that life expectancy for a lot of working Americans is dropping. It didn't even drop during the Depression. And nobody seems to care about it in the current government.

I mean if I'm Donald Trump and I was elected by those guys and they were dying before their time, holy smokes, I would be out there. He seems to not actually be acting on opioids. He seems to not – he seems to be harming the farm economy. So I think Democrats should be moving into the space he has abandoned, which is middle class jobs, middle class economics, middle class values.

The big fight will be entitlements. The Speaker has targeted this. He has said well now that we've passed this big tax cut, oh, we've discovered that we have a terrible deficit. We have to pay that off by cutting retirement and health care for seniors and Medicaid for working people and poor people. That is a fight the Democrats want and can win, and I think that's where this is going. I think that's just where the math is.

KRISTOL: So the congressional Democrats by your account, let's assume, do an intelligent '91, '92 type strategy. But of course ultimately it was Clinton who won in '92 and Clinton ran, as you know very well, as a different kind of Democrat, a new kind of Democrat. And how does that – I mean you need the presidential candidate ultimately to make this work.

BEGALA: Absolutely.

KRISTOL: So talk a little bit about that.

BEGALA: Absolutely. One of the tragedies of today is if you stop any Democrat on the street and say what does your party stand for, the chances of you getting a consistent answer are zero, even getting any answer are zero.

Some of that is because of the diversity of the party, which is a great thing, but a lot of it is because we don't have one clear leader, and nothing grows in the shade.

And we had Barack Obama, who was wonderfully articulate and could always tell us what our party stood for. Maybe the rest of us got a little flabby. So now President Obama has retired, Democrats have to figure out for themselves – in 2020 we'll do that.

So what happens then? I have no idea. I have no idea. Do we – do we say look, I just want to win, I want to find somebody pragmatic who can win back some of those Trump states who can entice some of those Trump voters to come back?

Or do we say I'm going to be the same as Trump, I'm going to be a mirror image? Right. I think that's a mistake. I think David Axelrod said this, he said usually when we change presidents, it's because we want a remedy, not a replica.

Now, the problem with that is reciprocity runs very deep in the human soul.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

BEGALA: And so you see Donald Trump – you have Kirsten Gillibrand dropping F-bombs in her speeches.

KRISTOL: I know.

BEGALA: Really? Really? Is that what we need?

KRISTOL: That I think is like an under – I mean it's a trivial thing in a way, but a friend of mine that worked –

BEGALA: But, you know, it's a sign.

KRISTOL: – in the Bush White House, in the earlier Bush White House made this point to me, that that is really short-term yes, some activists and people on Twitter think that's amusing and cute. That is really bizarre, the idea that that's going to appeal to actual voters. You know what I mean?

BEGALA: Well, what it does is –

KRISTOL: It shows –

BEGALA: – it mirrors Trump.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

BEGALA: And I think that's a mistake. I understand the impulse, but the notion that you could ever out-vulgar Donald Trump –

KRISTOL: Right.

BEGALA: – is nonsense. And I think it's bad for the country. This is the problem. Once you set a norm, people tend to follow it. Once you shatter a norm, people tend to abandon it.

And this is a challenge for my side. Can we answer Trump by being the opposite, not the mirror? And I don't know. I think yes. I think the early signs so far if you look at Ralph Northam in Virginia, if you look at Doug Jones in Alabama, if you look at Conor Lamb in Pennsylvania, Patty Schachtner who won in Wisconsin in a very, very Trump state senate district, literally her message was decency, dignity, cooperation.

What the voters are telling us is they want Democrats who are the opposite of Trump in tone and temperament as well as agenda. And I'm not sure at all in 2020 if the activists in my party will feel the same way. They may love it. They may want someone who throws more F-bombs and mocks Mr. Trump's hands or whatever stupid vulgar crap he's throwing out.

I think it would be a huge mistake. I think that, you know, Democrats, their strategy for 2020 ought to be Mrs. Obama's. Michelle Obama famously said when they go low, we go high. Easy to say, hard to do.

KRISTOL: She'd be a pretty – I always thought she would be a pretty good candidate.

BEGALA: You know, when she spoke at this last convention, I said this on the air, I said, you know, Barack Obama is one of the greatest orators in American history and he's only the second best speaker in his own house. That's how talented she is. Sadly she's not a politician. I think she has zero interest, but holy smokes is she good.

KRISTOL: So I guess the question is in the real dynamics of a – and we should talk this through a little since you've been through it on like a much higher level than 99.99 percent of Americans: the real dynamics in a presidential primary. In this case a lot of people running, right.

Isn't – I mean the activists, some of the activists donors even, I'd say the groups, doesn't all of that conspire to push them to the left in the fact or to the strident let's say? I mean how do you distinguish yourself if there are 14 people on the stage?

BEGALA: That's right. And it's really hard to distinguish yourself by being the most civil. And you're on a stage with 10 or 20. I mean there were 16, 17 credible Republicans, plausible Republicans the last time. I think there will be at least that many Democrats. There's a huge number of senators. There's a reasonable number of governors. And there is a growing number of potential outsider billionaire business people and a couple of really impressive mayors.

KRISTOL: Right.

BEGALA: Not the least of whom has just this week finished his term in New Orleans, Mitch Landrieu. I don't think any mayor has jumped straight from a mayoralty to the White House in history.

KRISTOL: No.

BEGALA: But no one has jumped from a reality TV show either.

KRISTOL: Right. No. I agree with you. Post-Trump it seems silly to have all these historical, you know, cautions or whatever you call them – guidelines.

BEGALA: But so – and I do not have a favorite in that field at all. I really don't. But I think that will be the challenge is how do I stand out without being the one who throws out an F-bomb or chants lock him up? You know, it's really going to be difficult. This is why I'm very bullish about 2018. I'm terribly worried about 2020. Democrats think that Trump's going to be easy to beat. They're completely wrong. I've seen this movie.

Yeah, it was a bit of a black swan, but when you get him –

KRISTOL: So let's talk about that for a bit. Why do you think as a re-elect, he hasn't expanded his base at all. I mean the demographics are slightly against him. The economy is not going to stay this strong probably for three years. Why isn't it, you know, probably a Democratic year anyway?

BEGALA: Because he's really good at one on one, the demonization.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

BEGALA: I have family and friends who voted for Donald Trump. And to a person if you talk to them long enough, you get this phrase. "You know, I really felt like I had no choice."

KRISTOL: Yeah.

BEGALA: Really? Now, I love Hillary. I think she would have been a great president. She'd be on Mount Rushmore. She's – but I do have to respect that a lot of people felt that way.

And I think that will be his message again. You had no choice. "Yeah, I'm kind of vulgar, I'm kind of a jerk, but I'm your jerk and you have no choice." His capacity, his ability to demonize is spectacular. And there is no bottom! He accused Ted Cruz of having a father who could have been complicit in the Kennedy assassination!

KRISTOL: Yeah.

BEGALA: I mean there's nothing – there's nothing he won't say. And, you know, that sadly proved very effective this last time around.

So I don't think Democrats should at all think that this thing is going to be easy. It's very difficult to dislodge an incumbent president in any situation.

KRISTOL: That we've seen. No.

BEGALA: And someone with this capacity to say or do absolutely anything.

KRISTOL: I think a Democratic House or even a Democratic Congress marginally helps Trump for 2020, just as it probably helped Clinton for '96 and Obama in 2012. You sort of – if you're a swing voter, you feel like well, he's being checked. I mean it's not out of control.

BEGALA: Right.

KRISTOL: You know, the Republicans got a little complacent. And not just complacent. The swing voters are like, "Well fine, we'll have Clinton as president. We've got a Republican Congress. It's sort of – they're checking each other."

You can imagine – I mean it's so chaotic in theater that you wonder whether it will feel that way in 2020 is the question I suppose. But anyway, I agree with you.

BEGALA: What we don't know is 2019.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

BEGALA: Let's say the Democrats take the house. It's entirely possible, not likely, it's possible that this president embraces the Pelosi agenda.

KRISTOL: Yeah. Or at least attacks the leadership of both parties similarly. You think actually embraces the Pelosi –?

BEGALA: If I were him – he will do anything. He sat in two meetings on national television, one of which on immigration where he told the Democrats, "I will sign a bill protecting the dreamers that does nothing else with no money from my wallet." He said it. Of course then he lied.

He sat down with Dianne Feinstein and other gun control advocates and said, "If you pass a bill that simply restricts ownership of certain assault weapons and expands background checks, I will sign it with nothing more." In fact some Republicans pushed back in the meeting and he said, "No, no, just this."

Now, he didn't do it. But what if he did? What if the Democrats did pass an increase in the minimum wage? What if they did pass a really – a real infrastructure program, not this nonsense he's pushing out now? A real trillion dollar infrastructure package. What if they did raise some taxes on the rich and cut them on the middle class? What if they actually did the things they were campaigning with? What if they shored up Obamacare and Medicaid, right? It's not inconceivable. This guy is not a person of principle.

KRISTOL: No, no, no. I think he would likely – I think we'd have to give him something, you know, a little money for the wall, a little money for this, you know, but it wouldn't take much to let him declare a victory, have a big signing ceremony, which he would love.

BEGALA: Because he's a demagogue and he's a populist and he simply wants to be popular.

KRISTOL: Right.

BEGALA: So remember, he opposed Obamacare. Well, what are you for? He said I'm for way better, greatest health care ever for less money. He would sell a diet book that says eat ice cream and lose weight.

KRISTOL: Right, right, right.

BEGALA: Right. This is not a guy given to either tough choices or a loadstar of principle. I mean he's not Ronald Reagan.

He was before my time, but you always knew where Reagan was going to come out. Democrats could pass anything and he would say no, that's not in concert with my principles.

KRISTOL: Right. Or if he compromised, it was kind of a principle compromise you might say with "Okay, I'm going to give them this, but I'll get this."

BEGALA: He [Trump] may do that. He may – keep in mind the politician he's given the most money to in his life is Chuck Schumer.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

BEGALA: So he is – he might – if I were advising him, I would, I would say you're now a Democrat for the next two years. You get with them, cut deals, yeah, get some fig leaf for your stupid wall or something, but we're going to sign to protect Dreamers, we're going to expand the background checks on guns, we're going to raise the minimum wage.

He's just going to get a poll and he's going to do – or he's pretty good in his innate polling and just he's going to support anything that hits 60 percent in the poll. He doesn't care if it comes from the left, the right, the center. Maybe not. Maybe he'll –

KRISTOL: Yeah. That's an interesting question.

BEGALA: – be so backed into a corner. The Mueller thing is a bit of an overhang.

KRISTOL: And I would agree with you that he's, surprisingly, very much felt indebted to the core Republican groups and hasn't wanted to cross them and the NRA and so forth. I mean it's a little – Why he thinks he has to go that far in that direction is a little bewildering.

But he must have learned the lesson somewhere you just need to have your base. I mean you need to have your base. And he could be persuaded – But how could he lose his base, really, running against a Democrat in 2020? There's no way. He could sign every Democratic piece of legislation and all the Trump people will stick with him obviously against any –

BEGALA: If Christian evangelicals can overlook Stormy Daniels, they could certainly overlook raising the minimum wage. A lot of his voters are populist economic former Democrats.

KRISTOL: As long as he is tough on judges and a couple other things – Guns actually might be one where he has to be tougher. The funny thing is he can compromise much more on the economic issues and sell out the kind of Republican economic agenda.

BEGALA: Interesting.

KRISTOL: I think maybe then on some of these more emotional issues where his voters seem to have much more at stake. That's interesting. So you think he's underestimated in the sense that he could cleverly tack to the center if you want to call it that, but let's just say, you know.

BEGALA: He could. What I don't know –

KRISTOL: In 2019 –

BEGALA: I don't know. I don't think the entire faculty of the Harvard Department of Psychiatry could figure out his psyche. I don't know.

That would be a really cagey – and he's very cagey. He's very canny. I recently wrote a piece saying don't call him an idiot. I know all his aides do. They call him an f'ing moron, an idiot.

KRISTOL: No, no. That's silly. He's clever.

BEGALA: He's very clever. Most conmen are very bright people.

KRISTOL: Yes. That's – especially when they've been doing the long con for 30 years.

BEGALA: Right. Right.

KRISTOL: I mean really, you know.

BEGALA: So but what I don't know, he also seems very emotional. And he has these fits of pique and the Mueller thing is putting so much pressure on him. I cannot imagine. I just can't. And so that's the counterbalance. That's the counterargument is that the sensible thing would be to be cagey and cut deals with the Dems, thereby ensuring your own re-election.

Well, he's going to be so pinched. Again, maybe he's completely in the clear. I tend to doubt it. It looks like he's guilty of everything, the Lindbergh baby kidnapping, everything, things that happened before he was born. But that he is going to lash out then and he is going to blame the Democrats who will be doing oversight.

So he may go the other way, which I think is not in his interest, but he very often seems to act contrary to his long-term interest.

KRISTOL: I think one other question, just thinking back to Clinton, '95, '96 which you were very much involved in obviously. Were you then in the White House yet or –

BEGALA: No, I was not yet in the White House until his second term. I was an outside advisor the first term.

KRISTOL: I mean that was a competently run White House, especially once [Leon] Panetta took over and competently run campaign, and there were some tensions, Dick Morris was doing his thing so maybe it wasn't quite – in retrospect we make it look more competent than it was, or more orderly than it was. I'm sure at the time it was crazy with Dick Morris being snuck in at 10 at night or something like that.

But still, the Trump White House has a level of dysfunction that's unlike anything we've seen I think.

BEGALA: We've never seen anything like this.

KRISTOL: And so can he even – that's where I think you could argue he could – even if his instinct was to go in the direction you're suggesting, that would take a fair amount of cleverness and discipline and organization and having cabinet secretaries who understood that this is what they were supposed to do in their relevant areas. It's not clear he has anyone, you know, or chief of staff like Panetta who would figure out, okay, we're going to have to sign welfare reform here in '96, you know, to take the Clinton example.

BEGALA: Well, this is where it helps to know stuff.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

BEGALA: You remember in *Animal House* the statute, it's the opening scene. They show the statute of Emil Faber, the founder of the college, and his words of wisdom etched in marble at the base are "Knowledge is Good." Trump sandblasts that off, but knowledge *is* good.

President Clinton knew what he wanted, for example, on welfare reform so he vetoed two Republican versions of it then signed a third that still was not exactly what he wanted, but he understood they ran the Congress. So he compromised on that. Then he refused to compromise when they wanted to cut Medicare. He said no, that's principle. And understanding that difference both substantively and politically, that really matters.

And Trump doesn't have that experience and that mastery. And I worry for my country that he doesn't seem to be wanting to surround himself with people of substantive mastery. When you – when you look at that White House from the outside and you just see the leaks and the lies and the conduct, you just think this is not the A team.

II: Looking Ahead to 2020 (41:39 – 1:12:24)

KRISTOL: But I guess it could be good enough depending on – So let's go back to the Democrats. Like all conversations in Donald Trump's Washington, we started out – we drifted into a very interesting conversation I think about Trump and his possible strategy in 2019, but of course he is a key player in the Democratic primary race ironically, right.

BEGALA: Right.

KRISTOL: But I guess a lot of my Republican friends and I sort of half believe this, say look, I mean this is all very nice that you think this, but at the end of the day Bernie Sanders got 45 percent of the vote, all in, in the Democratic primary, about half the white vote if I'm not mistaken, and it really was the minority, African Americans in particular who saved Hillary Clinton. There was a strong attachment to her and he wasn't very effective in getting those votes.

BEGALA: Right. By the way, I'm glad that you understand that. I get so many people that say, "Oh, it was rigged."

Bernie lost because he could not crack Hillary's core appeal with people of color. It's like in the Republican Party, if you can't get Christian evangelicals, I think, you can't – that's the heart of the party. It's not the majority of the party, but it's so essential to the coalition.

If you can't crack people of color – and it wasn't that Bernie had any problems. He has a terrific record on civil rights. It's that Hillary had a 40-year relationship in that community.

KRISTOL: Yeah, and he had – Vermont does not have much, you know, he didn't have that much relationship.

So, but that won't be the case in 2020. There's no Hillary Clinton with that kind of connection or Bill Clinton's connection in '91, '92, which also was – for all that he was a New Democrat and the most moderate, he also had huge support in the African American community.

BEGALA: But African American voters tend to be more moderate than the white liberals.

KRISTOL: Well, yeah that's the irony.

BEGALA: Again, sometimes people outside the party don't understand that, but people of color are the stabilizing force in my party. They're the most important I think – well, I hate to say best, but you know what I mean. They're not –

KRISTOL: Right.

BEGALA: They're not folks who go off on crazy tangents. They're people who really care about the kind of elemental meat and potatoes Democratic issues that I think are the most important ones.

KRISTOL: But the dynamic of '84 and '88, if we can go back to ancient history and you were like 12-years-old or something then, but still you were already slightly in politics then, graduated from college at least, right.

BEGALA: Yeah.

KRISTOL: I mean so that dynamic was [Democratic] multi-candidate races against an incumbent in '84 or an incumbent vice president in '88, which probably did – I don't know if they drove the party to the left exactly, but they certainly didn't let it come to the center much, where there were much more, you know – There was an African American candidate, Jesse Jackson representing that wing; and then there were other candidates representing other special interests so to speak.

And you ended up nominating a Mondale or a Dukakis who by current standards are not raving left wingers but were probably difficult to elect in the context of that decade.

And so I guess that would be the alternate account of 2020. Many candidates running. They start fragmenting into sort of identity groups almost. A lot of payoff to appeal to the most activist types and the most fervent donor types. And no one person kind of organizes the center – the centrist Democrats.

BEGALA: This is the challenge.

KRISTOL: With African American support maybe, which would be the ideal mix. Yeah.

BEGALA: The [Bill] Clinton election in the primary I think turned on two things. First, Doug Wilder chose not to run. We were scared to death of Mario Cuomo, but at the end of the day we were confident enough – Cuomo is amazing, but we were confident enough in Clinton's talent that he could defeat even Mario Cuomo. We really did believe that. It would be tough. We were really glad when he got out of the race.

Doug Wilder, first off, just as talented as Cuomo.

KRISTOL: For our young viewers –

BEGALA: Doug Wilder is the first African American mayor – governor of Virginia. The first African American governor in America since reconstruction.

KRISTOL: I think that's right.

BEGALA: Remarkable talent.

KRISTOL: I'm trying to remember now. Sitting governor at that point.

BEGALA: He was elected in 1989 so he was a sitting governor in Virginia.

KRISTOL: The sitting governor in '91. Yeah.

BEGALA: Doing a great job. Spectacular talent. Go find old YouTubes of Doug Wilder campaigning. You will see a guy who knows what he's doing.

Doug was thinking about running. When he got out of the race – he didn't get in. Rather, when he chose not to run, that made Clinton the only candidate who'd ever really gotten a sizeable number of African American voters.

KRISTOL: And Jesse [Jackson] didn't run, right?

BEGALA: Jesse chose not to run. I don't think he really seriously considered running. So the rest of the field, they were talented, but it was, you know, it was Jerry Brown in California. It was Bob Kerrey from Nebraska. It was Paul Tsongas from Massachusetts. And they didn't have the same – particularly Southern African Americans, right. Clinton is the heart of Clinton's coalition.

Had Doug Wilder gotten in the race – So it was that first. He was the only guy who had the lock, not the lock, but the long appeal with African American voters especially in the South. But then second, we were tired of losing.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

BEGALA: The party activists did not become more moderate, but they believed Clinton when he said I'll pursue a progressive agenda, not all your hopes and dreams.

He was for NAFTA and welfare reform and a hundred thousand cops and the death penalty. But he said you know I can win and these guys can't. And his charisma, his ability to unify, that was really critical.

KRISTOL: He needed the Mondale and Dukakis defeats, especially Dukakis where he had been ahead and people forget how much – [crosstalk]

BEGALA: Seventeen points ahead 110 days out.

KRISTOL: – the assumption was that Bush was so weak, George H.W. Bush. I think that was a blow to Democrats.

BEGALA: It was. And Dukakis had tried to get away from the left. He said it's about competence, not ideology.

KRISTOL: But then Bush didn't let him.

BEGALA: Exactly. So we inherited McGovern, Carter who had won once but then had lost. So McGovern, Carter, Mondale, Dukakis.

KRISTOL: Right.

BEGALA: And Democrats were tired of losing. So we had this great base in the African American community, especially in the South.

And then we had a lot of folks who themselves weren't all that moderate, but they voted for Clinton because they thought this guy could win because he was so talented. So they were pragmatic, strategic voters.

I have no idea if that's going to be the Democrats today. I have no idea.

KRISTOL: Or is it '84 or '88 where they just vote for whoever they, you know. They're angry, they vote against the incumbent president.

BEGALA: Right. I have no idea. But this will be a wonderful way for the Democrats to flesh out what they stand for. And there are lots of new ideas coming out. You had a little bit of this in Virginia in the governor's race.

But I really want to see – a little bit with Hillary and Bernie – I want to see my party debate, for example, free college. Senator Sanders and some others said that, I want free college.

KRISTOL: What does that mean though? Yeah.

BEGALA: What does that mean? Here I am, you know, a white guys in the suburbs. I'm putting a bunch of kids through college. My kids don't deserve free college, to tell you the truth. I don't believe that.

KRISTOL: Well, as an actual, empirical matter, it would be a redistribution *up* the income scale, not down it.

BEGALA: I think so.

KRISTOL: More upper middle class kids go to college than poor kids. So, you know.

BEGALA: My problem with this is two things, it's free and it's college. The Democrats tend to be labeled as the party of something for nothing and the party of smarty-pants intellectual arrogance.

Okay. What if instead we say what Ralph Northam said in Virginia, which is "I oppose free college." Ralph said this in the primaries when Perriello was running on free college. He said, "I went to the Virginia Military Institute. I earned my college by serving my country in combat as a physician, and if you want to serve, right, I think this would be an opening. I think we should have universal college, community college, job training, apprenticeship for anyone who serves, Marine Corps, AmeriCorps, Peace Corps. If you serve your country –"

KRISTOL: People who serve in the military, we virtually have that now with the GI Bill. Yeah.

BEGALA: We do now. We do now thank god and we have AmeriCorps, but it's not nearly to scale.

Honestly, that's the sort of big idea I'm looking for because I think we have two big problems in America. We have this opportunity inequality, which I think can be ameliorated with better skills, and we have this social tension where we're coming part.

Well, if we reintegrate – yeah, I have a brother-in-law who's a millionaire banker in New York. You know what, he was in the Army. He crawled through the mud in Fort Sill, Oklahoma. And you know what, that really changed him. He can't be an elitist. He can't hate, you know, rednecks or people of color because he crawled around in the mud with them serving in the Army.

And my generation doesn't have that and the next generation doesn't have that. So I really want to see us reintegrate. And you could do both of those things with universal service. From that you can earn your apprenticeship, job training, community college, or university aid. That's the way to do it because then that's reciprocal. It's back to what I think President Clinton preached and President Obama preached, which is this is about reciprocal responsibilities, you know.

And I don't want to see Democrats get away from that, but those kinds of arguments will be played out.

KRISTOL: Do you think governors or mayors have a better chance –

BEGALA: Yeah.

KRISTOL: – as Clinton did to make those kinds of, or are more inclined to make those kinds of arguments than senators and congressmen?

BEGALA: Yes. Yes. I think prudentially in our history we've preferred governors, vice presidents, civil war generals from the union side.

KRISTOL: Right.

BEGALA: But we don't –

KRISTOL: People who won World War II.

BEGALA: Yeah. People who saved the world. You know this, but the McCain/Obama race is the only time in American history when each party nominated a sitting senator. We just don't do that. And so we have a lot of great senators thinking about it.

I think voters prudentially are going to look at governors. I think some of these mayors thinking about it are very impressive. And then some of these business people outside of the system.

KRISTOL: What about that? Do you think Democrats are tempted because well, Trump – certainly the millionaires are tempted. They're looking at Trump, right, and thinking if he won, how come I can't win? But do you think at the end of the day the Democrats – will there be a real opening for that kind of outsider?

BEGALA: I think there's opening for anything. I really do.

KRISTOL: So it's really a wildcard race.

BEGALA: Yes. And what they say, how they conduct themselves, you know, we won't know.

KRISTOL: How do they get attention? I guess that would be one – I can see how someone gets attention on an impeachment hearing in the House. You know, if there are impeachment proceedings. Barbara Jordan did. She didn't run for president, but, you know, that kind of thing, right? The most eloquent spokesmen for –

BEGALA: But she was not the most strident. She was a very –

KRISTOL: Well, that's a good point.

BEGALA: She was actually one of my wife's professors. I didn't really know her well, but my wife was a – she was like a mentor to my wife. So very, you know, she was so judicious. Again, young people should go find YouTube tapes of those hearings and you will see a Houston congressman raised in segregation upholding the constitution in the most eloquent, beautiful, judicious way.

KRISTOL: Yeah. That's interesting. Yeah.

BEGALA: Right. She was not the most strident screaming, "Lock him up," you know. Seriously, when I worked in the White House, I had her portrait in my office.

KRISTOL: Is that right?

BEGALA: Yeah. I had a photographic portrait of her put up.

KRISTOL: She just died or she was still alive?

BEGALA: She was still alive then, but I so admired her. Again, I didn't know her well, but she was really good to my wife.

KRISTOL: That's impressive. So, I mean, I guess the question then is if you're Mitch Landrieu whom I know you know, the mayor of New Orleans who just finished off his service.

BEGALA: This week he finishes his term.

KRISTOL: I know him slightly. A very impressive guy. I mean how does he get the attention to even get considered? I mean, I guess that's the challenge someone like him faces, or an outside businessman or another mayor. Or Governor Bullock of Montana; I hear in the sort of Clinton Democrat circles, there's some interest in him. I don't know much about him.

BEGALA: I think any of them. It's a little like that movie Gypsy, you got to have a gimmick. You got to have something. For Mitch, he gave a speech that I think – I say this and I know people are going to be shocked. I think it ranks up there with any Obama speech. It is as good a speech about race in America.

KRISTOL: This is the Confederate monuments.

BEGALA: About the Confederate monuments. This is from a Southern white boy in New Orleans and he gave the most beautiful, intelligent, historical and nuanced speech on this – on why General Lee had to come down. And I think people are going to be – that's not his only speech, you know – I think they're going to see that kind of claim.

But it's that sort of thing, right. It's not simply their record of accomplishment. I'm sure he's filled a lot of potholes and addressed crime and schools are better. It's not simply that for any of these people.

Or Steve Bullock in Montana who has the wonderful claim that he was re-elected solidly on the same day his state went for Donald Trump by 20, 25 points. That's impressive, you know, a really good Democrat, you know, really red state and governing effectively with a Republican legislature.

I wouldn't encourage too many of them to talk too much about the endless details of, you know, how they fixed the sewer pipes in Bozeman, right? But instead use that as a lifting off point. Right? That's what President Obama, Senator Obama did. He had only been in the senate like five minutes and he had – I don't mean to be unfair to him. I think he worked hard on the ethics reform and put in real time there. But mostly what he was, was aspirational and inspirational.

KRISTOL: But people forget I mean, he and Luger did some legislation together and he traveled with Luger as I recall to Russia. That did help convey the sense that he wasn't simply a partisan left winger. Though he was in some ways to the left, I'd say you'd have to say, conventionally speaking, of Hillary in 2008. So it helped him I think take the edge off that.

And you think – and you find in talking to these people –

BEGALA: Well, but he had this claim. I'm sorry to interrupt but –

KRISTOL: No, go ahead.

BEGALA: But in the same way that Landrieu does about the statutes, he had this claim: as an obscure state senator he spoke out against the war and Hillary voted for it.

KRISTOL: Yeah. No that was huge obviously.

BEGALA: But for that. I think he might not have – even with all his talent –

KRISTOL: No, he wouldn't have. Yeah.

BEGALA: He was – because that negated the experience argument. "Well yeah, you have all the experience, Hillary. But on the most important vote of your life you were wrong." And the Democrats certainly felt that way.

So I think all these Democrats are looking at that too, like "What's my one claim?" You know, you're only going to have eight seconds as they try to cover the entire field.

And some of it will just be this stupid stuff: Who raises the most money? Although Trump blew that canard out of the water too, thank goodness.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

BEGALA: Who has the highest poll ratings? Who's going to – you know, one thing Trump did leverage was fame.

KRISTOL: I totally agree

BEGALA: He was a "pre-aware title" as my friend, Mike Murphy says.

KRISTOL: He's a what?

BEGALA: Mike Murphy taught me this. He's a big Hollywood mogul now.

KRISTOL: I'm well aware of that. Yes. I can't get him to answer my phone calls now. [Laughter]

BEGALA: Yeah. He calls everybody "baby" now.

KRISTOL: Yeah. Exactly. [Laughter].

BEGALA: So Murphy has this wonderful observation about Hollywood wanting "pre-aware titles." This is how you get movies about Legos.

KRISTOL: Yeah, right. Avengers II.

BEGALA: And Star Wars 38.

KRISTOL: Yeah, right.

BEGALA: A pre-aware title :you don't have to spend \$100 million explaining to people what Legos are.

KRISTOL: It's the single thing I most underestimated about Trump. I think the rest of it, I don't think I was that wrong, honestly. I thought there always room for populists, I thought there was a Buchanan element in the party. I didn't like it, but I didn't think it had totally gone away, and et cetera, et cetera.

But the thing I just underestimated was the pure celebrity, the value of his celebrity status. How well-known he was, and how much he conveyed a certain image. The other thing about the pre-aware title is, it's the title of someone you like presumably, right? And *The Apprentice*, which I really hadn't even seen,

he's playing himself being a super successful and decisive but also entertaining and sort of engaging business leader. Well, what's not to like, right?

I mean, you know. It's better than just being an actor. It's better than being, you know, if you're an actor, then you're just playing a bunch of other roles. That's fine, but I mean it doesn't really, you know. The Trump thing was almost – was uncanny almost in that way that *The Apprentice* helped him so much.

BEGALA: Well, and it gave him this hybrid status that I certainly failed to understand too, completely missed this, that I thought of Trump as, you know, kind of a disgraced businessman, had been bankrupt four times. Birther, saying racist things.

But for most Americans he was the guy I think it was Thursday, every Thursday he was in their living room, for like 14 years, playing this strong decisive and yet approachable billionaire mogul.

And that helped so much. And the fact that he was an entertainer, not a politician – somebody told me this once in Texas. It's like you don't understand. Hillary is a liar. It's like, okay? What do you think Trump is? He said oh no, Trump's a bullshitter. They said that's the difference. Like Hillary lies to me and I'm offended and Trump's just a BS'er. That's just what they do.

So you had this completely asymmetrical standard of judging, which he understood and I never did.

KRISTOL: Yeah. Yeah. But then I guess that gets back to the question do the Democrats imitate Trump or do the opposite?

BEGALA: Right. Or it doesn't mean they should imitate his manner or style, but boy, it would be nice if, you know, the Democrats nominated someone who'd ever like gutted a deer, changed the oil in his own car, you know. Drove their own kids to school, you know, something that connects you back to the middle class. It would be really helpful. And a lot of these people, I think, who are thinking about running fit that bill.

KRISTOL: Women, I mean how big a deal do you think the Me Too movement is and is it – I mean it does seem – it would be ironic I suppose after Hillary gets defeated that finally there's a sense that, you know, the systematic – I don't know how to say it exactly – discrimination against women, or the treatment of women has been, I think I'd say this personally, is a little worse than I realized, you know what I mean, more pervasive. And so does that change the dynamics presidentially at all?

BEGALA: I think it does. I think that the way Hillary was treated not only by Mr. Trump but by the media, Democrats are increasingly seeing as unfair, and I don't think they want to make the same mistake. I think there's a lot of younger women. You know, Madeleine Albright got in trouble. She said there's a special place in hell for young women who don't support Hillary because she's, like Hillary, part of a pioneering feminist generation.

And a lot of younger women raised after *Roe v. Wade*, we now have at universities at least 50, 55 percent of the students – I mean nobody can imagine Hillary being one of two or three [female] law students at Yale or Sandra Day O'Connor the top of her class in Stanford, being unable to get a job as a lawyer, being only offered jobs as a clerk or a paralegal.

But people – if you're 21 today, you can't imagine that world. So Madeleine said that and she got in a lot of trouble. I actually think a lot of younger women now feel that way. There's a lot of non-voters remorse, people who at the time said – younger people, and particularly women – “Wow, I didn't really appreciate like how big the difference could be.” And I think Trump has radicalized and mobilized women in the best way.

Again, I've missed so much. The older I get, the more I realize I don't know anything about this business. After Trump was elected, I was really upset. I was terribly – and what I didn't apprehend is how energized that would be. I was depressed. I was not energized. But young people especially and especially women were so invigorated, and I think that's great. That's the genius of democracy is that we can revivify.

And instead of women and people of color and young people being depressed, they in fact have been more motivated and in the best ways. They're not throwing rocks through the windows at Starbucks. You know, they're registering to vote. It's just great.

So in that sense I think this has been terrific for the country. Me Too being an eye opener for guys like us of our generation but also invigorating women who maybe thought – I heard so many young women, especially, say this "Well, we'll have a woman president. Obviously we'll have one."

Well, we've been around a quarter of a millennium and we've never had one yet! I mean can guys be that much more talented? It's preposterous. Obviously there's structural sexism. So I think in that sense Me Too has been a really positive force in this country.

KRISTOL: And a pretty big one is what I guess, I sense. I don't quite know if it translates into, "We need to have a woman candidate for this or that office." I'm not sure that's the –

BEGALA: Right. I don't either, but I do think that, "I've been there," is a really powerful message. "I get this. I've seen this." It's why I, like I say, I like a guy who's changed the transmission.

Or a woman, you know, who's been assaulted or at least an attempt – I mean it's so much more pervasive than, you know, insulated well-off, white guys like me ever knew.

And my hope is that it's not going to just peter out with Hollywood and Washington. That it gets to the, you know, assistant clerk at the store who's being harassed by the store manager. I really hope it does, but a woman who can say, "I've been there. I know." I think that's going to have enormous appeal.

So I don't think that Democrats are going to say, "Well, we've nominated a person of color, we've nominated a woman, no more." I don't think that's the right answer at all. I think that "I'm one of you" is still a really powerful message. And having that kind of empathy irrespective of whether you're white or black, male or female, is critical to being a Democrat.

KRISTOL: Yeah, "I'm one of you" is the opposite of Hillary's, "I'm with her," though. That was – I did think Trump could win the general [election] when he said at the convention: "They want you to say 'I'm with her.' I'm telling you, I'm with you."

That was a very clever reversal of Hillary's slogan, and it exposed something true I think, that the Hillary campaign was about Hillary, and the Trump campaign ostensibly was going to be about the people.

BEGALA: Well, Bill Clinton's laws – he has so many – but two of them that always come to mind are, "an election is about the future, not the past." Which is why all these Democrats thinking of running, don't just run on your accomplishments, run on your agenda. And the second, "it's about the voters, not the candidates." And he would always say that to me, even in private. That would be – like in strategy meetings. We have to make it *their* lives, not mine. And his life, of course, became fodder for the tabloids, and he never allowed us to simply fall back into that.

And I do think while Trump said it masterfully at his convention. He's not governed that way. It is all about him. He is the most narcissistic, solipsistic, selfish person I think we've ever seen.

So I think someone out there who says – [Bill] Clinton said this all the time, “I’m going to be fine either way. Let’s just be honest. Okay. I’m fine. Like I’m going to be fine. The question is will *you* be fine? I’m good either way.”

So is Hillary, by the way. She’s making millions writing books. And I think that, getting it back to folks – Bill Clinton used to call it walking-around folks – that’s the key for the Dems.

KRISTOL: I guess my conservative friends, my fellow conservatives might say well, this is nice, your account of energized but not too radicalized Democrats, and a left wing that’s willing to accept the verdict in the primaries and stuff.

But what about the actual left in America? I mean it’s awfully – it’s not just energized; it’s shouting down people on campuses. Political correctness is going from level to level and becoming really somewhat anti-liberal I would say. I mean how much of a problem is that for the Democrats? How manageable is that in your judgment?

BEGALA: It’s a real problem. You had activists shout down Bernie Sanders at a rally this last time around as if Bernie somehow is insufficiently progressive. He’s not even a Democrat; he’s a socialist. I was a very latecomer to this too. I always keep talking about how little I know, but it’s what I’ve realized.

I teach at Georgetown. I’ve taught there as an adjunct for 18 years. I never, never saw any of this. I really didn’t at Georgetown. It’s America’s greatest Jesuit university, and it celebrates free speech. In fact, Father Leo O’Donovan allowed Larry Flint to come to campus, the most notorious pornographer coming to our greatest Catholic university. Wow, that’s free speech.

So I always thought it was bologna when my conservative friends – I’ll name them – our buddy Tucker Carlson. Tucker would always say this to me, and I always thought it was crap. Oh, that’s a Fox News myth.

You know what, he was right and I was wrong. It wouldn’t happen at Georgetown. But now that I’m the father of three college students and another about to go – one’s graduated so whatever, but I’ve done the university tour. It is real and that censorious tone says “Well no, free speech does not cover hate speech.” Well, what’s hate speech? “Speech that I hate.” You know, that’s really problematic.

If liberals don’t stand for free expression, especially at a university, then all is lost. Then there’s no more liberalism. And I do think that’s a skirmish that has to happen within my party and within –

Now Barack Obama was early on this too, before I saw it. He was speaking in Michigan, supposed to be touting some like probably school finance program. But he digressed, extemporaneously, and talked about how important it is at college to get your feelings hurt, to be challenged, to be made uncomfortable. And it didn’t get the same pickup I wished it had because I think that’s – he’s a messenger who progressives will really listen to in a way they won’t listen to Tucker.

And I do think that’s a problem, and it’s an underappreciated one, or at least it was in my case. And it morphs into the workplace. Nobody wants the kind of animalistic behavior we’re learning about from Harvey Weinstein or Mark Halperin or some of these other – Eric Schneiderman, the attorney general of New York. This is why we build prisons if in fact he’s guilty, right.

But at the same time, the sense that a lot of people have that now liberals no longer want free speech, you can’t say something unpopular, you can’t even say, “Well gee, I like Trump.” Right? Or “I oppose this policy or that.” It is a problem, and it’s one that has to be hashed out in the progressive movement.

And you’ll know that my side is losing when you see prominent politicians like Bernie or Hillary, whoever is running this next time, you see them shouted down at a rally. You cannot allow a heckler’s veto. You

have to, I think – if you have a university, you have to allow Ann Coulter or whoever you don't like, Ben Shapiro, whoever the latest, you know, boogeyman is on the right. That's the whole point.

So I think that's a very valid criticism from conservatives, and it's one that again – all of this will play itself out in 2020, all of it. And I'm in the Obama camp here. I very much want the free debate. I believe in my ideas. I believe we can win. I believe in the marketplace. And so I very much take my cues from President Obama who said let's upset people. Let's have this fight. You know, that's the whole point.

KRISTOL: I hope that version of liberalism prevails.

One last question. As you mentioned, President Obama, it hadn't really occurred to me I think, is there any particular role you see him playing? Or Hillary or Bill Clinton? Or are they just – they stay out and they're kind of –

BEGALA: I don't – I don't know.

KRISTOL: let the next generation –

BEGALA: I doubt. You know, usually – look, President Obama put his thumb on the scale for Hillary. I think there's been enough reporting to suggest that, when she was running in the primaries. And President Clinton *really* weighed in for Al Gore, almost cleared the field. Bill Bradley is an impressive guy, but Gore won every single primary, every single caucus with Clinton's strong, strong backing.

I don't see that happening this time. I don't think President Clinton or Hillary or President Obama, Michelle, I haven't talked to them. I don't know about 2020. It's so far away. But I don't think any of them are comfortable thinking of themselves as king makers.

This has got to be organic. It's got to bubble up. And, you know, I have faith. I really do. I have faith in voters. But I don't think that, in fact, that voters will respond well, even to someone they love like Obama or Clinton. I don't think they'll respond very well to that. And if I were advising someone who is not endorsed by them, I would use it. I'd say "Oh, I love President Obama. But you know what? He doesn't get to vote in the Iowa caucuses." Or New Hampshire primaries, you know.

KRISTOL: I think the Democrats that have won so far in 2017 and '18, they've sort of kept these national figures at arm's length, right.

BEGALA: That's a good point.

KRISTOL: They didn't want them coming in much for the them. Northam, I think for example.

BEGALA: Particularly in these midterms.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

BEGALA: We don't. Now President Obama did come in and campaign for Ralph Northam. He was enormously helpful. But in the main, it was his own race. Conor Lamb didn't want anybody.

KRISTOL: Right. Right.

BEGALA: I guess Joe Biden did come in there.

KRISTOL: Right.

BEGALA: But he was born in Pennsylvania.

But in the main they've been very wise. Doug Jones was going to have – I think he was going to go up to New York. President Clinton was going to do a fundraiser for him. Clinton knew him, had made him a U.S. Attorney I believe.

Canceled all of it. He never left – once it looked like he had a real chance, he never left the state of Alabama, and he never let anybody come into that state from outside. It was really smart. He ran a very smart race.

So in the midterms that will really matter. When you get to 2020 and those early primaries, I still think the better course for the party elders is "Let's let a new generation take over and let's see what they do."

KRISTOL: And you think it will be a new generation, the nominee? Or Biden, Sanders, Warren –

BEGALA: Wow, I don't know. I honestly – I think this is the first time in my life I haven't either had a favorite, or had a real sense of where the party is going. I just don't know. And so I just say let's put them all on the track.

You know, I know what I want to see. I want to see big ideas. I want to see a middle class focus. I want to see a sense of bringing people together and rejecting the politics of demonization.

You know, if the Democrats' message is, "Shut up, racist," to a third of the country. That's not for me. Not that there's not racism in America. But I think if you tried to label and brand and demonize everybody who voted for Donald Trump, that's not a very good way to win an election.

KRISTOL: Well, on the note of not knowing what's going to happen, that's an appropriate note to close on.

But you've been very illuminating on the current moment and what's likely to happen over the next couple of years. Thank you very much for taking the time for this conversation.

BEGALA: Thanks. Well, it's fascinating. Thanks.

KRISTOL: Thanks, Paul. And thank you for joining us on Conversations.

[END]