

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Conversations with Bill Kristol

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I: What Do the Midterms Reveal?(0:15 – 40:30)

KRISTOL: Hi, I'm Bill Kristol and welcome to *Conversations*. I'm very pleased to be joined again today by Ron Brownstein. We've had two of these, I believe, in June, 2017 and June, 2018. Everything you said was correct. Now we're meeting post-election to discuss what happened in November, 2018.

BROWNSTEIN: We can keep doing it until we get it right.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that would be endless. [Laughter] But no, but we are approximating and we're getting there.

BROWNSTEIN: Yes, exactly.

KRISTOL: I think people should watch those – those do stand up very well. But let's not go back. Let's just – if someone came down from Mars, or if a V.O. Key or some wonderful former student of American politics were resurrected and he said, "What's going on, Ron?" What is the current state of American electoral politics?

BROWNSTEIN: Well, look, as we talked about in those earlier sessions, I believe we are living through an overlapping demographic and geographic sorting out of the country. And at all of those trends have really acquired more topspin under Trump, meaning that they are accelerating. What we saw in the 2018 election was a confirmation and really an intensification of the division and the re-structuring, re-configuring of American politics that was very evident in 2016.

Both demographically in terms of the divide by age, younger people moving more Democratic; Republicans still very solid among older, although some chinks in that armor this time.

Second, the wider divides between college and non-college whites, as the price of Trump's effort to generate these enormous margins among working-class, older, blue-collar, evangelical white voters, is a backlash among college-educated white voters, especially women.

And then this incredible, I think, and maybe the most striking of all, geographic divide. Where metro America pretty much everywhere, probably worth talking more about this, metro America pretty much everywhere made as emphatic a statement of rejection of Trump I think as you could have imagined. In terms of the number of House seats Republicans lost in major metro areas, not only in traditionally Democratic areas, but in places that have been much more Republican. And conversely, rural, small town, exurban America – still pretty much on the bus. So the gap between them gets wider.

KRISTOL: Yeah. You'd said before though actually I think that you thought that the trench between the two Americas might well get even deeper and wider than it has been and it's been building for a while. When historians – I don't want to go too much in the past, but when did this begin? This goes back decades, right?

BROWNSTEIN: Well it's really the last 25 years of American politics, and certainly since the 70s, we've seen American politics divide more along the lines of culture than class. And that is what produces the geographic separation.

But having said that, I mean, Bill Clinton in the 1990s, was about transcending those cultural divides, a lot of the whole New Democratic agenda. And when he won for president each time, I don't know if we talked about this before, he won about half the counties in America each time. By the time Obama won reelection, he won only a quarter of the counties in America, but he won 88 of the 100 largest. Hillary Clinton, four years after that, she wins less than 500 counties, but wins the 100 largest counties by over 15 million votes.

So, you see this kind of – the Democratic coalition narrows, but deepens. And then the Republicans kind of control what's outside of it. What happened this time was the Democratic territory expanded out a little further, right? Because not only – take Texas as a –

KRISTOL: But just on the history for one minute as a footnote.

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah, sure.

KRISTOL: So I guess you could argue, for all that Clinton was such a fascinating figure, in a way he's an interruption or a hiccup in something that begins, I guess, really with Nixon, almost a reversal of the working-class –

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah.

KRISTOL: And then the liberal elites –

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah, what I call the class inversion, right? I mean, the '50s, '60s, '70s, '80s, certainly – we don't have data on the '40s but I'm sure it's true in the '40s. Democrats run better every election in the Presidential with non-college whites than they do with college whites. They were the party of people who work with their hands. And then in the '60s you begin to see the flip where –

KRISTOL: The silent majority –

BROWNSTEIN: The silent majority, racially-tinged issues, crime, national strength, defense, Watergate, excuse me, Vietnam – you know, all of these things. Republicans improved their position among working-class whites. You get to the Reagan Democrats in '84, millions of people who grew up in a household with a picture of Walter Reuther on the mantle, Franklin Roosevelt – they find themselves voting Republican.

And then the reverse happens in the '80s and '90s, which is Democrats begin to improve their performance among the college-educated white voters.

All of these trends, Trump takes and magnifies. I mean, he doubles down. Explicitly crafts a strategy that is about maximizing the Republican advantage among the groups that are the most uneasy, I think, with both economic and demographic change. So that's older, blue-collar, evangelical, non-urban whites.

KRISTOL: I suppose people will look back and say, if Clinton was the parenthesis, but Bush and Obama, both knowingly and unknowingly you might just say, or just by who they were –

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah. I mean, Obama –

KRISTOL: – Intensify these trends somewhat, right?

BROWNSTEIN: Oh, yes, absolutely.

KRISTOL: And then Trump sort of puts a real –

BROWNSTEIN: But Obama I think intensifies it. Bush, yes. Bush becomes much more of a base president as he governed than he ran. 2000 he's a compassionate conservative; 2004 he's promoting ballot initiatives to ban gay marriage.

KRISTOL: Right.

BROWNSTEIN: Right. So he's kind of heading in this direction. And then Obama in 2008, I remember having a conversation with his advisors. He had been an organizer in steel mills in the Back of the Yards in Chicago and they thought he was going to be a candidate who could appeal to white working-class voters. Very limited inroads on that – some, but very limited.

But as he governed, they were hoping that the Affordable Care Act, and an irony eventually maybe it got there, the Affordable Care Act would be something that would be a calling card to working-class whites to basically say government doesn't only exist to take your money and give it to poor people, which is what obviously, kind of the caricature that many have bought into. It can do something for you.

They didn't see it that way. The white working-class overwhelmingly saw, particularly early on, the ACA as a transfer program. And so that was a big headwind. And then, culturally, as the presidency went on, he more and more kind of bent to the reality of the new Democratic coalition which is kind of culturally changing America.

Yeah, so, he, and by 2012 he basically runs for reelection the same way Bush does in '04 – as a kind of a base-first, you know. What Bush decided, what Karl Rove and Matthew Dowd, and other people on the side for Bush in '04, was that – and this was I think a seminal moment in American politics – that it was more cost-effective to turn out somebody who agrees with you and doesn't usually vote, than it was to persuade someone who usually votes but may not agree with you.

And Obama did the same thing in 2012. And then Trump has taken that much further as president where the entire strategy is about energizing what is roughly on a good day 45 or 46 percent of the country.

KRISTOL: Yeah, so let's put some numbers on this. So we have this election, the two Americas both show up, they show up in large numbers.

BROWNSTEIN: Amazing. 115, 116 million people vote. Almost 35 million more people than voted in the last midterm. The highest turnout since I believe 1914, in a midterm election. And it produces, I think, a very sharp divide, but a very decisive overall result. First of all the Republicans are closing in as we're talking, on possibly losing 40 seats in the House, the most seats they have lost since Watergate in any Congressional election, presidential or off-year. The Democratic margin in the popular vote is past eight, closing in on nine, may exceed nine million.

KRISTOL: So, eight, nine percent.

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah. More than the 2010 Tea Party election, potentially more than the 1994 landslide.

KRISTOL: And the Republicans, if I'm not mistaken, won narrowly by a percentage point I think, the national House popular vote in 2016.

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah, I don't remember the exact, but it was narrow.

KRISTOL: Because they ran ahead of Trump.

BROWNSTEIN: It's a big –

KRISTOL: So that's a big, so you have a, just in the House vote to House vote, apples to apples.

BROWNSTEIN: Absolutely.

KRISTOL: Sort of eight, nine, ten percent switch.

BROWNSTEIN: And then to me, what was the most, I think, striking about this election beside the magnitude, was the nationalization of the trends we're talking about. So, if you look in the national polls, a few things happened.

First, we had the widest gap we have seen between college and non-college whites and how they voted in an exit poll. Where Democrats still stuck at 37, 38 percent among non-college whites – although there's one exception I'll get to – but getting to 53 percent among college-educated white, which we had not seen before. And that gap was true everywhere again, with somewhat of an exception in these upper Midwest states, and I'll come back to it.

We saw a big backlash against Trump among young voters. Not only 18 to 29, but 30 to 44. So not only the millennials, younger millennials, but the older millennials and the youngest Gen-X. Democrats win two-thirds of 18 to 29, and almost 60 percent of 30 to 44. And again, it's incredibly consistent. They won 18 to 29 in every state with an exit poll, except for Indiana where they tied – I mean, every single one. And they won 30 to 44 in almost every state.

KRISTOL: And then the gap is pretty big as I recall. So if you put together the 18 to 29 and 30 to 44, so I'd say 18 to 44, that's about 60 – 40, better than 60 – 40 Democrat.

BROWNSTEIN: Yes, definitely. It was two-thirds, and three-fifths.

KRISTOL: So it's 62, 63.

BROWNSTEIN: Right. Probably in that range.

KRISTOL: And then among 45 and up, it's about 50-50.

BROWNSTEIN: Right, because Republicans underperformed where they had been among seniors. And that may have been the Democratic campaign on the Affordable Care Act, and also arguing that the tax cut would eventually force them to go after Medicare.

But I was going to say, so if you look at these kind of contrasts on the exit polls they are everywhere, but the actual results really is what is striking. Because you know, we talked about the heart of the vulnerability for Republicans were the last Republican House members holding on in otherwise blue

metro areas. They were the equivalent in 2018 of the John Spratt's and Ike Skelton's of 2010. All of those rural Blue Dog –

KRISTOL: And '94.

BROWNSTEIN: '94. These members of the House who have been holding on for years in places that have been going the other way at the presidential level, the other way culturally. But, you know, it's not Nancy Pelosi, it's old Ike or old John or John Murtha. 2010, the lease ran out for all of those rural Democrats, that the Blue Dogs were almost exterminated and they've never really come back in those places.

I think the safest prediction that we talked about was that that was going to happen to a lot of Republicans in the suburbs of Philadelphia, suburbs of Minneapolis, suburbs of Chicago, New Jersey, Denver, all of those places –

KRISTOL: Northern Virginia.

BROWNSTEIN: Northern Virginia. Okay, all of those places, in fact on election night, they went down.

But there was another concentric circle of Republicans in districts that were demographically similar, but had very different political traditions that had been more Republican in their leaning.

So you're talking about Richmond, Charleston, Atlanta, Houston, Dallas, Kansas City, places like that – Oklahoma City – where the overall metro had not been nearly as blue. Well, many of those lost as well. And obviously, the biggest example is right here in Orange County, California where kind of the seed bed of modern conservatism with Nixon and Reagan, and Republicans were swept out of every seat that they hold in Orange County.

So to me, the most striking thing of all the results was how uniformly the white-collar suburbs that had normally voted Republican on economic issues rejected the Trump stamp on the party.

And conversely, beyond that in kind of exurban and small town American, yeah, there were a few dents in the fortress, Abby Finkenauer in Iowa, a couple seats in upstate New York, some heavily Hispanic, but rural seats – but not much. I mean, Republicans, that pretty much held very solid for Trump, their numbers among non-college whites were over 60 percent again for Republicans overall.

So what you see, I think, is this alignment very clear and understanding that midterms don't predict the outcome of the presidential two years later when we talk about that, but I think the parameters of the presidential are pretty clear.

That you see a consolidation of the metro areas pretty much everywhere against kind of non-metro pretty much everywhere. I mean, look at Texas. I mean, Beto O'Rourke won the five biggest metropolitan counties in Texas as a Democrat by 800,000 votes. Barack Obama won those same five counties in 2012 by a combined, roughly, 80,000 votes. Won them by ten times as much.

KRISTOL: With Obama it was he won the cities and then he lost the suburbs.

BROWNSTEIN: And he won the cities narrowly.

KRISTOL: And so washed out and gets clobbered up.

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah, and of course, that is what happened to Beto, too, in the end.

KRISTOL: But he only lost by what, two, three points.

BROWNSTEIN: Right. The rural, small town. But if you look at the results in statewide election – First of all, there were, as we talked about a minute ago, there were only – Trump only won 13 of the 100 largest counties in America. Eighty-seven of the 100 voted against him. Of those 13, and I looked at this, roughly half moved sharply towards the Democrats in 2018. The largest county he won in America was Maricopa.

KRISTOL: Trump in 2016.

BROWNSTEIN: In 2016. Maricopa, which is Phoenix and its suburbs, was the largest. And again, it's indicative of these places that are demographically similar to the suburbs of Philly, perhaps, although more retirees, but had not, didn't have a Democratic tradition.

This time, Kyrsten Sinema won Maricopa County by 60,000 votes. The second largest county in America that Trump won was Tarrant County, which is Fort Worth. Beto won Tarrant County. Suffolk County was the third largest, they got kind of a mixed result where Lee Zeldin held on, but it voted strongly for Gillibrand.

And then you go through the list. Macomb County in Michigan – of the thirteen counties in the top 100 that Trump won, literally half of them voted solidly Democratic in this election. So we see the nationalization of this kind of metro that is diverse, younger, more secular and more information age really recoiling from Trump's vision of what the country is.

And then, what we can call Trump country, maybe a few objections here and there, but not many. And that allows you to win North Dakota and that allows you to win Missouri and it allows you to win Indiana in the Senate.

But, it's an open question whether it allows you to get 270 electoral college votes because of the one big exception, which we probably have to get to, which is at the three "blue wall" states in the upper Midwest: Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania, that Trump dislodged from the "blue wall" that made him President. They showed clear signs of reverting to kind of their pre-Trumpian behavior.

KRISTOL: So in a sense, one might say what? That the suburbs of Phoenix and Houston are now more like the suburbs of Philadelphia and Chicago than they are like the rest of the state?

BROWNSTEIN: That is the key point. And I think Kristen Soltis Anderson wrote that in one of the conservative publications. That is exactly right. That is the key. That is what has happened under Trump, which is that we had seen these white-collar suburbs moving Democratic since the '90s.

And certainly, and I believe that, if you look at the states that flip from red to blue, in the '90s it was California, New Jersey, and Illinois. And in the 2000s it was essentially Virginia, Colorado, and to a somewhat mixed extent, North Carolina. And in this decade, it's potentially Georgia, Arizona, and Texas not being as blue as before.

But as they go in a Democratic direction, two things happen. The minority population grows, in all the cases, the minority population grows. And the white-collar suburbs become more competitive for Democrats.

And historically, what kept Arizona and Georgia and Texas from joining Colorado and Virginia, much less New Jersey, California and Illinois, was that those white-collar suburbs had not flipped. They're more socially conservatives, more of them are evangelicals, it's also true. But in this election, Kyrsten Sinema wins college educated whites and Beto O'Rourke gets into the mid-40s.

We talked about that the last time we were together. Democrats have been stuck around 30 percent of college whites in Texas; he gets into the mid-40s. If you're in the mid-40s, like what he got this time, and you project forward to the youth and minority turnout of a presidential year, you don't have to improve a heck of a lot to win Texas.

KRISTOL: And say a word about the states that have gone in the other direction, because that's also interesting.

BROWNSTEIN: Yes.

KRISTOL: Ohio, and if I'm not mistaken

BROWNSTEIN: And Iowa.

KRISTOL: Ohio and Iowa were absolutely on the bubble in 2000 and 2004. Wasn't Iowa resolved by a few thousand votes and in each of those –

BROWNSTEIN: And Ohio historically I think it was –

KRISTOL: And Ohio is famously the late state to be called in 2004. They've become redder.

BROWNSTEIN: Yes, they have.

KRISTOL: And why are they different from –

BROWNSTEIN: Because it's the demography. Right? So, these are states that are older and more blue-collar whites and more white Christians.

KRISTOL: Less well-educated, more evangelical.

BROWNSTEIN: Right. More evangelical or even –

KRISTOL: Older.

BROWNSTEIN: Older. Where Democrats have been kind of levitating above their national performance, was the phrase I used in 2016. The levitation ran out. And you'd have to look at this election –

KRISTOL: Missouri was once a semi-swing state.

BROWNSTEIN: It was, and Bill Clinton won it both times I'm pretty sure.

KRISTOL: Yes, I think that's right. Yeah.

BROWNSTEIN: And certainly, I covered Claire McCaskill's earlier races there. It was a swing state, and Democrats could win. But the – both sides are moving. Right? Small town, mid-size city, rural America, blue-collar America, is doubling down on the Republicans. And Trump has consciously focused on expanding that advantage.

I think the advantages of that were clear in 2016 when he won, and he also helped hold the Senate seats in Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin that were on the ballot. This election, the price of that trade became more apparent where you see the movement of the urban centers and the metro areas, and younger voters, everywhere – I mean, everywhere.

You're talking about, in 2020 Millennials will exceed the Baby Boom as a share of eligible voters, not of actual voters, but they will exceed the share of eligible voters. Post-Millennials will first come into the electorate. By 2024, post-Millennials and Millennials have to be pretty close to the same share of actual voters, as Baby Boomers. Okay, you're talking about 67 percent voting Democratic. I mean, that is not a long-term kind of growth strategy.

And yes, if you – you can certainly in the Electoral College and the Senate, given the kind of the way power is distributed, you can squeeze out another win in 2020, maybe even in 2024. But it gets harder and harder as this kind of emerging diverse America moves into the electorate, to in effect base your strategy on saying, you know, on mobilizing other people by saying we're going to stop them from taking political power, economic power.

I mean, they got it. That to me is like the thing. Like, the people who are targeted by Trump, who Trump uses as foils to maximize his numbers among his base. They got the joke. I mean, they came out. They felt that their place in America was being threatened, and they came out and they voted.

KRISTOL: Demography is destiny. It seems increasingly, as you say, we're not persuading, we're having sort of elections that look more like censuses than elections that look more like arguments.

BROWNSTEIN: Right.

KRISTOL: Maybe that's your formulation or someone –

BROWNSTEIN: Somebody said that.

KRISTOL: Someone said that.

BROWNSTEIN: Somebody said that, yes. And I think that's right, at this point. But not entirely by the way.

KRISTOL: So, yeah, so what issues, what is turning out these voters on both sides? Do we know from this election any more than we did before?

BROWNSTEIN: I think, look, first of all there are still swing voters. And there are swing voters, there are white, upper-middle-class in particular. I mean, Independents broke – there are some Independents, they broke for Democrats. A lot of these white-collar, white voters who we talk about moving away from Trump, they don't show up in polls as Republicans because they're center-right Independents who normally vote Republican.

And there's no question, you know, people can say, well, how accurate are the exit polls or whatever. Whatever you think about the exit polls, the fact is, there were an awful lot of white-collar suburbs that Republicans won in the past that they lost. And something had to happen. Something – it was not all differential turnout, I think. There were voters who had normally been comfortable voting Republican, who were not comfortable voting Republican because they felt that they were not going to constrain Trump, or kind of restrain him in any way.

And I think what has to be a little ominous for Republicans is that they lost 40 seats with unemployment at 4 percent. And they had the biggest losses in the places that are doing the best.

KRISTOL: Which suggests a cultural vote, not an economic vote.

BROWNSTEIN: It says a cultural vote. A statement about, I think, Trump ran the last – look, he has throughout his presidency, but even more in the last two weeks – it was as if George Wallace was

broadcasting from the White House. I mean, the things he was saying, kind of the open appeals to racial resentment and racial fears, and the caravan is coming to get you. People heard that, okay?

And much like Ed Gillespie in Virginia when he kind of broadcast MS-13 every day. It was not only Hispanics who found that threatening to their vision of what America is. And what Trump is doing is forcing – well, he's not creating it obviously because what we're talking about it going on for decades, but he is hardening this sort of cultural sorting of the electorate in a way that is ceding the places that are doing the best in the economy, that are growing, that are the most diverse, that are the most economically productive.

I don't know if you saw the data that Brookings pulled together?

KRISTOL: Yeah, summarize that. That's interesting.

BROWNSTEIN: That the – you know, I believe that the divide we have is between – the fundamental divide in our politics is between those who are comfortable with the way America is changing, and those who are not. And that goes –

KRISTOL: And you had the coalition of –

BROWNSTEIN: The transformation and the coalition of restoration. And that goes beyond – I mean the most obvious manifestation of that is culture and demographics – role of women, increasing number of minorities, contribution of immigrants aside. But it's also economic. And that the places that are at the forward edge of economic change tend to be part of the coalition of transformation.

And what Brookings calculated was that the seats, the House seats represented by Democrats in the new Congress, will account for over 60 percent of the total economic output of the country and the Republican seats will only be about 40 percent. And that is consistent with the 2016 result where Hillary Clinton's counties, even though they were only one-sixth, less than one-sixth of all the counties in the country, accounted for two-thirds of the GDP.

So, you basically have the parts of America that are in every way I think defining the future, that Trump is systematically alienating Republicans from. And it is, as I said, it is not as if you can't win with the other strategy, particularly given the way the Electoral College works and the Senate works, but it's hard to see how that is a long-term proposition.

Both because of the demography, but also because I believe in American history political power follows economic power. And the idea that the places that are the most left behind in the emerging economy are going to indefinitely set the rules for the places that are driving the economic innovation and growth, just seems to me inherently implausible. Maybe one manifestation of that was the fundraising.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

BROWNSTEIN: The big Democratic fundraising advantage, right? I mean, this incredible small donor – I was in several races this year that I visited where you combined kind of urban and non-urban areas. And like for example the Washington 8 seat, that went from Seattle to the Eastern part of the Cascades. The number of people who contributed and volunteered from Seattle to come out and elect the Democrat in a seat the Democrats had never won since 1980, since it was created, was enormous. I mean, like I said, the people who felt – the people who Trump has targeted got the message.

KRISTOL: Yeah, interesting. I mean, and I guess just in pure numbers, someone from abroad was asking me about this. And it occurred to me that I think Democrats now control, well, got about 53 percent of the vote, 54 percent of the vote it looks like for the House. About the same number for the Senate. Their seats are bigger than the Republican seats if you're just to add up –

BROWNSTEIN: Right. And you've got the California thing where you've got both, two Democrats.

KRISTOL: Yeah, so that's a little confusing. But I think Democratic governors are now going to govern in about 53, 54 percent of the country, even though they have a couple fewer than the Republicans. So the actual sort of just pure split in the country in numbers, leaving aside the Electoral College for a minute, does feel like it's a little bit the Democrats have – it's a bigger coalition.

BROWNSTEIN: Right. But I believe the coalition of transformation is bigger than the coalition of restoration. I think the evidence is, there's a lot of different ways you can measure that. But that doesn't mean it can govern. Right?

Both because, one, they don't turn out. Pieces of it do not turn out as much as the Republican coalition. Although having said that, the shift of white-collar whites, who are the most dependable voters of all, kind of changes that equation a little bit. Republicans are heavily reliant now on non-college whites and they don't vote in midterms as much as the college whites do. So, the assumption has been correctly that midterms electorates are more favorable to Republicans. It becomes less true when the white upper-middle-class realigns.

But first, so, there's turnout issues, there's distribution issues. I mean clearly Democrats are overly concentrated in big cities, which is a problem in kind of legislative arenas. The Senate, the two Senators per state rule, really is a big advantage for Republicans at this point. Because the smaller states lean – not all, I mean you've got New England and Oregon, but they basically lean toward those interior, mostly white, heavily rural, Christian states where Republicans are going to do very well in the Electoral College. We had three cases in our first 210 years where they diverge from the popular vote. Now we've had two in five elections, and it's not coincidental they both went to the Republicans. That could happen repeatedly.

And then there's all the other issues about kind of voter ID laws, and whether the red states are making it too hard to vote. And registering voters in Texas is extremely difficult, they make it – a lot of hurdles.

So all of those things mean that the coalition of transformation, even if it is bigger, isn't guaranteed to govern. But, having said that, again, Millennials will exceed Baby Boomers as a share of eligible voters in 2020. Millennials and post-Millennials will *significantly* exceed Baby Boomers as a share of eligible voters by 2024. And don't get me started on 2028. Eventually the bill comes due.

KRISTOL: Right.

BROWNSTEIN: Eventually the bill comes due. If you are essentially saying we are writing off the generations entering the electorate because we're going to use them in essence as a foil to maximize our advantage among the pieces of the electorate that are shrinking.

I almost would ask *you* a question. I am stunned how little, other than this piece by Kristen that I mentioned, how little debate and discussion there has been among Republicans about the extent of their suburban wipeout in this election.

KRISTOL: Yes.

BROWNSTEIN: Not only, as I say, not only in the normally Democratic places, but in the places that have been much more Republican. There are very few – I see very few voices either elected or from the strategic community, getting up and saying, look at the direction we're heading here.

KRISTOL: Unless you're an anti-Trump Republican.

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah.

KRISTOL: In which case, you say it. But then people say, “Well you just don’t like Trump.”

BROWNSTEIN: But why are –

KRISTOL: So let’s say the more sophisticated argument, I suppose, from the Trump-rationalizing or Trump-accepting Republicans, would be, “Look, this was an off-year election, they want to check the President. The voters in the Richmond suburbs voted for a Democrat over a Republican on the margin, there she won by a point or whatever, because they want, you know, it’s not good to have one-party control of all three branches, especially when Trump was a little erratic and overreaches. So let’s have the Democrats run the House. That doesn’t necessarily tell you how they vote in a straight up choice for presidency. It doesn’t tell you how they vote if they’re reassured that the checking is happening and therefore they can kind of go back to a more – you know.” I guess that would be the argument. And there’s some truth to that.

BROWNSTEIN: No. And there is truth in that. It’s not an unreasonable argument. But I think to ignore – basically, if you were doing a science experiment, and you were asking what groups would recoil from other Republicans if faced with a Trump-like appeal and presidency? Exactly what you would have predicted on the chalkboard, happened.

KRISTOL: Right.

BROWNSTEIN: And so then to turn around and say, well it’s no big deal –

KRISTOL: And the economy being so strong, I think is a big problem for the –

BROWNSTEIN: Right. Four percent unemployment, lose 40 seats – how do you do that?

KRISTOL: Yeah. As we were discussing before we began the conversation off-air, you know, in the past in these off-year elections the economy was slowly recovering, in ’94, 2010.

BROWNSTEIN: Yes.

KRISTOL: From recessions in both cases.

BROWNSTEIN: Reagan, ‘82.

KRISTOL: Reagan, ‘82, we were in the recession still. And then the incumbant president did better because the economy really came back in the next two years.

BROWNSTEIN: Right.

KRISTOL: Presumably the economy is not going to get *better* in the next two years.

BROWNSTEIN: And if anything, you’d think there’s only a downside. And the, again, the people who are doing the best are the ones who pulled back the most.

KRISTOL: Yeah. I mean, I think the turnout argument also is interesting, and cuts a little bit against my mythical fairly pro-Trump Republican explaining it was just checking. Because you got mobilization on both sides.

BROWNSTEIN: Yes.

KRISTOL: Right? It wasn't that the Republicans were demoralized.

BROWNSTEIN: No. '94 and 2010.

KRISTOL: Which in a typical midterm can be reversed because the electorate is so different in a presidential year. Correct me if I'm wrong, but it would seem like if this electorate is a more presidential type electorate, both in absolute numbers and in distribution, it's a better predictor of a presidential election, right?

BROWNSTEIN: Yes. And if anything, the one, even with the higher turnout among young people, the one glaring thing about the midterm is that youth turnout as a share of the vote was lower than it will be in 2020.

So, the biggest, and it may be that the blue-collar, white share will be a little higher than it was. But I think the biggest change between the electorate in 2018 and 2020 is that more of the – a bigger share of the electorate in 2020 will be under 44 and that's where Trump is struggling the most.

I mean, that's the one thing that – even with, again, they turned out in much bigger numbers than we've seen before. They held their share of the vote even as the total pie got a lot bigger. But it's like nine, 10 percent; it's probably going to be more like 14 percent for under-30 in 2020. And again, that is the piece of the electorate that he is most conspicuously alienating, even as he drives away all these white-collar whites.

Again, once you have a – once Republicans can no longer count on most white-collar whites, the composition of the electorate stuff doesn't benefit them as much, right? Because they are reliable voters in the midterm.

KRISTOL: And of course events could happen, and things could change, and we'll just stipulate that. No one's being deterministic.

BROWNSTEIN: Sure, right. And it's happened. Look, I mean, if you go back, right? We talked about this. 1958, 1966, 1974, 1978, 2006 – I might be missing one – all those cases, bad midterm for the President's party; two years later the White House changes hands. On the other hand, 1954, bad for Eisenhower but he wins. Reagan, '82, he turns around and wins. Clinton, '94, turns around and wins. Obama, 2010, turns around. There's not a decisive pattern.

KRISTOL: Right.

BROWNSTEIN: About whether the midterm predicts. I mean, look at '38 – the worst ever, one of the worst ever for Roosevelt and then he wins, two years later. So, Truman in '46, he loses, bad, and he wins two years later.

KRISTOL: Right.

BROWNSTEIN: So there's lots of examples of Presidents coming back. I don't know that you can look at this and say, Trump is doomed. But I think what you can say, is that we have some – the concrete is hardening. I mean, the molds are hardening. We know, I think, an awful lot about what this will look like, demographically and geographically.

People are responding – as I said, if you had a science experiment, people on both sides are responding the way you would predict to the kind of presidency that he is offering. And what that sets up is, it's just absolute Battle of the Bulge, as I like to say, in 2020, between what America has been and what it is becoming.

KRISTOL: And I suppose that happens because it is an intensification of trends that were already in place. If it was a one-off you might say, well it wouldn't be a hardening, it would be kind of a reaction, but then people would go back to something else.

BROWNSTEIN: Right.

KRISTOL: But the fact that he's compounding something that's already – a trend that's already begun.

BROWNSTEIN: That's absolutely right.

KRISTOL: And it's been underway for quite a while, right?

BROWNSTEIN: That's absolutely right.

KRISTOL: And cultural developments that are in a way –

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah. The cultural – I mean, culture is supplanting class as the principle divide, I think is something that goes back really to the '60s, to the '68 election, probably, is the beginning.

But the specific kind of configuration that we're living through, is really since the '90s, I think. And we're just seeing it again kind of hit the ground with topspin. Under Trump it's just moving faster and you get the nationalization. I don't think people have really kind of fully, as I say, in the Republican Party kind of grappled with the thought of Maricopa County voting Democratic.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

BROWNSTEIN: Or, the big, five urban counties in Texas, giving an 800,000 vote margin to a Democrat. I mean that was not possible ten years ago, remotely.

KRISTOL: And so I guess in the case of Maricopa, which is interesting, they stuck Republican at the gubernatorial level with Ducey. So that suggests a different kind of Republican –

BROWNSTEIN: Yes.

KRISTOL: Can still do fine there.

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah.

KRISTOL: But on the other hand, what is interesting to me is that in the federal race for the Senate, you had a pretty attractive Republican candidate. Or I think one would have said that Martha McSally was not particularly Trump-y, kind of a –

BROWNSTEIN: And then she went much further in a Trump direction.

KRISTOL: Right. And also all the federal races just got nationalized because it was all about are you going to vote with or against Trump in the Senate or the House, right?

BROWNSTEIN: You know, I think we talked about this earlier. The general trend is that our House races and our Senate races are becoming more Parliamentary, where it is becoming harder to win in districts or states that usually vote the other way for President. They're really about kind of less about individuals, more about which party do you want to be in control. And that question is totally dependent, heavily dependent on your views about the President.

In this election, this hit a new peak. We saw, according to the exit poll, 90 percent of the people who disapproved of Trump voted Democratic for the House. Which is the highest we've had – the highest share of Presidential disapprovers who went for the other party, since 1982. And 87 percent of the people who approved of Trump – 88 percent of the people who approved of Trump voted Republican.

If you look at the Senate races, every Democratic Senate candidate, except for Menendez – Bob Menendez, scandal-tarred Bob Menendez in New Jersey – every other one won at least 88 percent of Trump disapprovers and almost all of them were 90 and above.

I mean, so we had a very parliamentary – and in fact, if you look at where did Republicans make gains? They made gains in North Dakota, Missouri, Indiana, and Florida which are all states that had voted Republican in a majority of the cases since 1992. I think it is now – let's see if we can do the numbers here off the top of my head – something like there are 26 states that have voted Republican in most elections since '92, 24 that have voted Democratic in most elections. Republicans are up to approximately, I think it is – 46 of the 52 Senate seats in the 26 states that have voted for them. And Democrats are up to 41 of the 48. I mean, Democrats gained Nevada.

KRISTOL: Right.

BROWNSTEIN: Now, they gained Arizona on the other side, but they lost four on the other side. So, you're seeing this kind of clarification up and down the ballot. Where in effect the parties are partitioning the country into these spheres of influence, which have very consistent lines of –

Now, the governors are different because they're less tied to the federal issues.

But it would not be surprising to see Republicans in serious trouble in places like Maine in 2020, or Colorado. Places that have voted traditionally Democratic at the presidential. I mean, Cory Gardner has to be the most endangered, followed closely by Susan Collins.

KRISTOL: And the Democrat Senators already lost those states in 2014.

BROWNSTEIN: There aren't that many left. But there are a few.

KRISTOL: There are a few left.

BROWNSTEIN: There are like six, there are six left. I have a hard time naming them all. But there are six Democrats left in states that have voted mostly Republican.

KRISTOL: Right.

BROWNSTEIN: Now, of course it is a little of an advantage for the Republicans because there are slightly more states that vote Republican at the presidential level than Democratic.

KRISTOL: It does happen even, as you say, within states we were saying about Arizona and Texas.

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah.

KRISTOL: But I was struck, and I won't get the numbers quite right, in Governor Walker in Wisconsin, having been elected and reelected, and survived a recall, so he's won three times statewide. Running for a third term which is always tough. Against a very ordinary, bland Democrat. So it's a pretty good sort of case study maybe. [He] loses by a point, I think, it ended up being, maybe a point and a half or something like that. Having won before by what, four, five, six points. So not a huge swing, but a swing against the Republicans.

What was striking was he improved his vote – did you see these numbers?

BROWNSTEIN: Yes.

KRISTOL: – in rural counties and counties that he carried, and then lost by a bigger margin in urban and some suburban counties.

BROWNSTEIN: And he not only lost in the Democrat-leaning suburbs, but he lost a lot of margin in the Republican-leaning suburbs, right? So it wasn't only that Dane County, Madison produced astronomical numbers, but the W.O.W. counties, they call them, around Milwaukee, he underperformed.

KRISTOL: Right.

BROWNSTEIN: And we saw that in Texas. I mean, like not only did Beto win the urban centers, Beto O'Rourke against Cruz, but places like Collin County outside of Dallas that used to be two to one Republican, Cruz won like 53/47. And there were other suburban counties outside of Houston and Austin that actually flipped, that O'Rourke carried.

And again, this is – I'm just astonished there isn't more conversation in Republican ranks about the extent of the white-collar recoil from so many aspects of Trump: open appeals to racial resentment, the way he talks about women, the daily uncertainty that any of the constraints on the rule of law will hold.

I mean, there is a price that is being paid, and yet you have, you know, Hugh Hewitt and all of these – Peggy Noonan, "it's like a slap on the wrist." And it's like everyone is doing their best to minimize what just happened.

If this alignment endures, if this alignment endures – If, in fact, you have a Republican Party that is overwhelmingly strong among blue-collar, evangelical, non-urban whites, but is losing two-thirds of people under 30, three-fifth of people 30 to 45, and now losing a clear majority of college whites – where they lose, as we talked about, the Democrats had their best number ever among college white women, but also ran almost even among college, white men, which is pretty remarkable, too. If that's the alignment for the next fifteen years –

Remember during, you actually remember this, remember during the SALT talks? During the SALT debates when the Committee on the Present Danger? And your dad – And the Democrats would ask the U.S. generals, "Would you trade our army for their army?" Remember, "Our weapons for their weapons?"

KRISTOL: Right.

BROWNSTEIN: Remember, that was kind of the response? Would you trade, which hand would you want for the next fifteen years?

KRISTOL: No, I think the Trump – obviously, I'm against the Trump hand for substantive reasons, for the country, but as a political and electoral matter, it's hard for me to see how he pulls that off. Now I would say the Trump people have short time-horizons.

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah.

II: Looking Ahead to 2020 (40:30 – 1:22:21)

KRISTOL: He surprised everyone in 2016. So that just gets to – let's just talk about 2020.

Let me just back up. On your question of why there isn't more Republican alarm, leaving aside never-Trumpers, some of whom are still Republican, like me, and some who aren't. I would say one thing, I do

think the weirdness of the fact that election night looked less devastating than it turned out to be two weeks later now that we're still counting all these votes from California and the whole Orange County swath of suburbs are gone, and other places look like they might tip over. That had something to do with it. Trump did a pretty good job on election night of saying "Hey, picked up Senate seats. Unprecedented. House always goes, who knows if it's 31 or 34 or 37 seats, who can keep track of that, you know."

BROWNSTEIN: Right.

KRISTOL: And I do think there was a certain amount of Republican complacency as a result. Mitch McConnell is still majority leader, they will still confirm the judges. The basic outlines of Trump's deregulatory and tax cutting agenda aren't going to be overturned by a Democratic House.

BROWNSTEIN: Right.

KRISTOL: So you know, it was an off-year setback, but – and then Trump gets to show up again in 2020 and pull off an inside straight. I guess that would be the argument.

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah, right.

KRISTOL: So can he pull the inside straight again. Let's get to that, you hinted at this before in terms of – I mean, what happened in 2016, to be very simple about it, is he held the states that were teetering, that had been genuine swing states, let's say especially Florida, obviously and also North Carolina.

BROWNSTEIN: Right.

KRISTOL: Lost all of the other states that were going Democratic. And then miraculously pulled the upper Midwest.

BROWNSTEIN: Three states out of "the blue wall".

KRISTOL: Only one of which he needed to win, actually, but he won all three – Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and Michigan.

BROWNSTEIN: And that is an advantage that he has. That Democrats, so –

KRISTOL: So looking forward.

BROWNSTEIN: The first caveat, as we have said, is that the midterms do not predict the outcomes. Clearly, we have seen that repeatedly. But as I said, I think they do give us the parameters. And you know, the key to Trump winning the presidency was dislodging Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania from my phrase, "the blue wall," which were states that had voted Democratic in all six elections, from '92 through 2012.

KRISTOL: It's amazing. All six post-Cold War elections.

BROWNSTEIN: 18 states have voted Democratic in all of those consecutive elections. The most states they had won that often, I believe, ever. And he beat, he knocked Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania out by a combined 80,000 votes. So what happened? First of all, what happened in those six states?

I mean, that is the first place where Democrats are looking after the midterm. Democrats elected a Senator and a governor in each state, right? And of the three, I think –

KRISTOL: And not by particularly close margins in most cases.

BROWNSTEIN: Wisconsin was competitive at the governor. The Michigan Senate turned out a little closer than we thought. But Pennsylvania looks very tough for Trump. I mean, I think it looks very – based on these results.

Because what you saw were Democrats not only running up the score in white-collar suburbs, but moving back into some of the mid-size cities that he really improved on, like Erie and Scranton that had a more blue-collar presence. Michigan, again, I think kind of – you'd have to say more of a tossup, but leaning Democratic. And then Wisconsin feels like, to me right now, the absolute tipping point.

I should go back a step. If you look at – if you kind of think about this, the 15, there are none of the states that Clinton won, I think, showed any vulnerability to Trump.

KRISTOL: I guess the two she won by the narrowest margins –

BROWNSTEIN: Were Minnesota.

KRISTOL: Were Minnesota and New Hampshire.

BROWNSTEIN: Right.

KRISTOL: New Hampshire is very small, so let's just put that aside. And Minnesota is an older and whiter state.

BROWNSTEIN: And it should be, but his approval rating in the exit poll was 45 percent. He faced high levels of disapproval among college whites, and subpar performance among non-college whites in Minnesota. Maybe New Hampshire there's some opening for him but –

KRISTOL: But they did badly in New Hampshire actually. They lost both Houses in the State Legislature.

BROWNSTEIN: Right. Exactly.

KRISTOL: Governor Sununu hung on with a reduced margin.

BROWNSTEIN: So it's hard to see that. So, okay, so you say okay start with all that. And then they really have two pathways back to 270 [electoral votes]. One is through the Rust Belt. And one is through the Sun Belt. And the Sun Belt are the new opportunities that emerge. Let's file that for one second.

I think the evidence from 2018 is that – and I've talked to Democrats – I think kind of uniformly, the shortest pathway back to the White House, the clearest road – Woody Hayes in Ohio State used to talk about “three yards and a cloud of dust.” I think it's “three states and a cloud of dust.” I mean, it really is Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania. The states that he just lost, showed clear evidence of second thoughts.

And it was – if you look at his approval rating in the exit polls in the states, they're at 47 or below in all three states. And to me what really jumped out was that not only did he face his highest disapproval among college, white women in those three states, as in any battleground – So let's finish what I was saying, among college, white women, roughly two-thirds in each of those three states said they disapproved of Trump. That was the highest in any of the 2020 battlegrounds for which there are exit polls this year.

But even more significant, you know Democrats I think were frustrated in most parts of the country that they could not recover more ground among working-class, white women. That, you know, they keep thinking, you know, Trump is somehow going to –. It didn't happen in most places. But in these places it did happen.

KRISTOL: So that cuts against the – that’s the caveat to the overall narrative.

BROWNSTEIN: That is the caveat to the overall narrative. I mean, the Midwest exceptionalism. So in these three states in the exit poll his disapproval among non-college, white women was between 46 and 48 percent, which is plenty for Democrats to win those states back, because the secret ingredient to him winning all three was his strength, the fact that so many working-class, white women in the Midwest rejected the first female, you know, major party nominee is to me the principle reason he was President.

KRISTOL: But a lot of that was about her.

BROWNSTEIN: A lot of that was about her. You know, John Brabender I was talking to, is a Republican strategist based in Pennsylvania, he was, you know, “Look, you can’t underestimate the Clinton factor with those working-class, white women.” And so if you –

KRISTOL: The negative Clinton factor.

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah. If you’re a –

KRISTOL: And it’s such an irony, the first female nominee.

BROWNSTEIN: Isn’t it?

KRISTOL: I mean, I’m not saying good or bad, just as a factual matter that she was more off-putting to those swing voters, and probably therefore lost the election, than a generic –

BROWNSTEIN: – Democrat would have been.

KRISTOL: Yeah. Would have been.

BROWNSTEIN: Absolutely. Isn’t that amazing?

But if you’re a Republican I would have to say that the results, if you’re a Trump fan, both the electoral results and the exit poll kind of supplementary data, from Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin is the most ominous thing here.

Now the best news is that Ohio looks really hard for Democrats. Iowa I think remains really hard for Democrats. And then you’ve got the whole question of the Sunbelt.

KRISTOL: And before going onto the Sunbelt, unless, assuming Trump could hold the Sunbelt states, which include Florida, which is a very swingy swing state, but still he won it.

BROWNSTEIN: Right.

KRISTOL: And Republicans won both Governor and Senate races there, the good news from a Trump point of view is only has to win one of those three.

BROWNSTEIN: One of those three.

KRISTOL: The Democrats have to sweep them.

BROWNSTEIN: Right, right.

KRISTOL: So if something goes a little wrong in one state.

BROWNSTEIN: Exactly. The Democrats have to win all three unless they pick up one of the Sunbelts.

KRISTOL: So let's talk about those for a second.

BROWNSTEIN: Unless they pick up one of the Sunbelts. And there, you know, look, you have –

KRISTOL: So what's that, Florida, North Carolina –

BROWNSTEIN: Well, first of all, I think we can say that Nevada has moved out of the swing state – it's not completely out of reach for Trump, but it's very hard. He was at 47 percent approval, big Latino turnout, the Culinary Workers Union has shown it's got a lot of juice, it can really turn out the vote.

By the way unions seem to be the only thing that succeeds in turning out a large number of Hispanic voters, just parenthetically.

Colorado, he's not in the game anymore. Corey Gardner I think is dead man walking. And then New Mexico not really in the game, which was earlier in the century. What's left in the Sunbelt – and Virginia's not in the game. I mean, so those four have moved from kind of Purple to pretty seriously Blue at the Presidential level at least.

So what have you got left? You've got kind of the SEC and the Southwestern Conference, you've got North Carolina, Florida and Georgia. And then you've got Arizona and Texas actually, you know.

So of those, you know, Arizona I think looks like the best bet. The Southwest looks, it's interesting because there are contrasting strengths. In the Southeast you have large African American populations. And they vote more Democratic than the Hispanic populations do in the Southwest. So that's an advantage. But those working-class white numbers in the Southeast are really unbelievable.

KRISTOL: So even a Florida, which has been just a dead even state for two decades.

BROWNSTEIN: Right, 10,000 votes out of eight million in the Senate race. It's hard. I think Florida –

KRISTOL: But it was stunning on election night I was looking at it, and I'm sure you were, you know, it's such an interesting state, you get familiar with it over these cycles, and looking at county by county. And I kept thinking, I think Nelson and Gillum were going to win because they're running up these margins in Broward and Dade and Miami Dade.

BROWNSTEIN: And Orlando and Tampa.

KRISTOL: And then you project out, the way you do when you're looking at, at the precinct level and you see it's 50 percent in, you think, well, let's see if that's going to double the margin here. And then the panhandle comes in and those margins were insane, for the Republicans.

BROWNSTEIN: Insane. And also parts of the I-4 corridor in between Orlando and Tampa. I mean, he won, the Democrats won most of the places that we think of as the historic swings, especially in the I-4 corridor, in the middle of the state, from Orlando and Tampa, but Republicans generated just astronomical margins in retiree communities, older whites, and then rural places, small town places.

So that's kind of the modern dynamic of politics. And one thing that strikes me is that in Georgia, in North Carolina, in Florida and in Texas, there are probably enough of those rural, small town places where the elevated margins Trump creates can overcome probably, not guaranteed, the loss he creates in the urban areas.

Arizona's different. Arizona there's a lot of rural parts of the state. There aren't that many people. So if you lose, if he loses Maricopa County in Arizona, which is not guaranteed, again, it might be tougher, he might not be stronger than McSally, but I don't think he can overcome it the way he can overcome losing the suburbs of Atlanta or the metro areas in Texas or even in Florida. There isn't enough *else*.

So actually I kind of came out of this election feeling like Arizona of the Sunbelt options right now looks the best for Democrats. I mean, North Carolina is tough. I mean, the Democrats continue – North Carolina, Florida and Georgia now are all very similar, where the Democrats are really consolidating their strength in the metro areas.

They may in fact get elevated turnout among African Americans, but there are a lot of rural whites and they love Trump, you know. And Texas is like that too. Florida's kind of got the exception where I think a lot of Democrats are kind of scratching their heads over what happened with Hispanic voters and why Gillum and Nelson both underperformed. And that was critical in their defeat.

But, you know, the Sunbelt, and I've written this many times, I believe the Sunbelt is the long term future of the Democratic Party that they're going to have to win more of the Sunbelt states to offset the Missouris and the North Dakotas, etc. they're going to be losing. But if you look at the evidence for 2020, right now, the straightest line back to the White House is right through those kind of rust belt metal-bending states of Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania. That is the –

There's not going to be a Democrat like Hillary Clinton who spends 100 million dollars in Florida or whatever she spent and a 100 million dollars in Ohio and minimizes Michigan – Those are going to be the center of the campaign.

KRISTOL: With Arizona maybe and Florida I suppose–

BROWNSTEIN: With Arizona, Florida. I think they will stay in Florida.

KRISTOL: As the possible pickups to compensate for Wisconsin – for losing one of –

BROWNSTEIN: I think they stay in Florida, but I would be surprised if they invest in Florida at the same level. If Joe Biden is the nominee they invest in Ohio. I doubt it's the same level.

If Beto is on the [ticket] – The biggest question really is Texas, because you can make a plausible case for competing in Texas that they can get close. But, you know, you can't dip your toe in Texas. Texas is a huge financial logistical commitment that will impinge on your ability to put resources into other states.

So if he's on the ticket, if he's the Presidential nominee or the Vice President, that's one thing. If he's running for Senate I think it's going to be a really tough question for Democrats. Do you try to piggyback on that in a way that could help him? Or do you say I need this money now for Milwaukee and Green Bay?

KRISTOL: Just another word or two about what happened, and people's understanding of what happened. The Senate races, kind of unusual I think for the Democrats to pick up two seats and lose four at the same time.

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah.

KRISTOL: I mean, you see the wave kind of goes uni-directionally, right?

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah, with Florida as something of a razor edge anomaly, what happened in the Senate I think is revealing of where politics is going, because if you look where do Democrats lose seats? They

lost seats in Missouri, North Dakota, Indiana, older preponderantly white, the big rural population, heartland states.

KRISTOL: Three incumbents losing in a year that was good for their party. I don't know that that's ever happened.

BROWNSTEIN: Incumbents rarely lose when the other party holds the White House. I mean, 2002 with Bush and the 9/11 election was one example. But very rare. This is very unusual.

And this is another reason why you feel like some real realigning is going on, because the other side is Democrats win two states both in the Southwest in kind of younger, diverse Sunbelt states that reflect their emerging coalition, in the same way that North Dakota and Missouri reflects kind of the Trump era Republican coalition.

And I think in 2020 you're going to see, I think there's enormous pressure on Democrats to find ways to win Senate seats in places like: Georgia, North Carolina, Colorado, Texas. Yes, they held the Rustbelt states this time. They held Ohio, they held Pennsylvania, they held Michigan and Wisconsin. But those kind of other heartland –

What is the long term prospects for Democrats in West Virginia or Montana after Manchin or Tester? Not very high. In the long run I think in every sphere, whether it's the House, but especially the Senate and the Electoral College, in a world in which we're seeing the kind of divides we are demographically between the parties, Democrats have to find ways to make more inroads in the Sunbelt to offset what is likely to be further erosion over time in these older, heartland states.

So Arizona, Nevada, kind of the flag being planted. In 2020 we'll see Colorado, North Carolina, Georgia and Texas all have Republican Senators who will be running for reelection. Democrats need to find a way to start winning some of those races if they want to be over 50 in the Senate.

Unless we're going to change the distribution of the Senate to reduce the advantage of South Dakota, North Dakota, Kansas, Wyoming, etc., Democrats are going to have to I think make some inroads in the Sunbelt because their position in the older heartland states, I just think the long term trend is toward, slow or fast, but it's going to erode.

KRISTOL: Yeah, interesting. And in terms of the Republican consultant class and operative class and maybe donor class, it is an interesting question where we're speaking now just before Thanksgiving so maybe things will change when this airs, when we put this up in a couple of weeks. But why, I guess they just think it's a temporary thing, maybe it's –

BROWNSTEIN: I don't know.

KRISTOL: They can't do anything about it.

BROWNSTEIN: I don't know. I mean, look –

KRISTOL: You think they should be more alarmed than they are?

BROWNSTEIN: I think they should be more alarmed than they are. I mean, I think, yes, you have a Republican party that is being refashioned even more into a party of older, blue-collar, rural, evangelical white America. You have a structural advantage in the Senate, great. But when you're losing this many House seats in this many thriving, dynamic communities all across the country, and you're losing ground among the groups that are all growing as a share of the electorate over the next ten years, if this Trump stamp – If the alignment we saw in this election endures, is that a viable future for the party?

KRISTOL: But I guess what they would say is, look, Republican – I mean, the reason it's hard to get Republicans, and I've tried, to get them so alarmed is they control the Presidency, they still control the Senate, they won those close races in Florida and Texas. So you can say that the trends are going in this direction or not, but people said that 10, 15 years ago about Florida. And they just defeated an incumbent in Florida who had won it – So those are huge states, right?

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah, people will make that argument. I think that the question of whether you can – how long can you hold North Carolina, Georgia, Texas, certainly Arizona, by surrendering not only younger generations and minority voters, which there is a lot of overlap in that, but also these unprecedented inroads for Democrats among college whites.

Now admittedly they don't do as well among college whites in Texas or Georgia at all as they do in Virginia and Colorado. But they're doing a lot better than they were six years ago. And it doesn't take as much because of the large minority populations.

Yeah, I mean, it's not like, it's not like Trump can't win in 2020. He can't squeeze out another win from this coalition. But again I go back to that kind of Cold War question from the Arms Control debates, "Whose hand would you want to play over the next ten years?"

KRISTOL: True. But for the political operatives if they think maybe Trump can win or certainly I think from their point of view almost more, if the Republicans can hold the Senate, hold some of these big state governorships, like a Florida and a Texas and, you know, they trade off some Blue states for Red states or whatever. They beat back – I do think losing the marquee elections –

BROWNSTEIN: Had a big impact on it.

KRISTOL: Had a big impact on the way people reacted right away. If you were a Republican, it was, "Thank God we picked up Senate seats." That was kind of the minimal hope was one or two Senate seats. It looked more like three or four in that first, on election night. The House blowout looked a little less bad than it is. But even so, it's a reversal of the current House. And as we've just seen you can reverse that again.

BROWNSTEIN: Right, right.

KRISTOL: And the famous, you know, the huge marquee elections, the Republicans squeaked out. So it shows the Republicans still have the muscle to pull this out.

I think there's a certain – believe me, I'm with you in thinking this is ultimately, not even ultimately, but will prove pretty soon to be self-deception and is under-estimating how bad an election it was, given how good unemployment was and so forth. But having said all that, I think that's how the Republicans rationalize not looking too hard and sort of –

BROWNSTEIN: And under the hood at what –

KRISTOL: And feeling okay about it.

BROWNSTEIN: About what happened.

KRISTOL: Right.

BROWNSTEIN: I mean, like I said the major changes, the biggest change you can probably predict in the electorate between 2018 and 2020 is there will be more young people voting. Maybe more blue-collar, whites voting which would help Trump, but you're guaranteed I think more young people voting.

KRISTOL: That gets to the real topic we now need to focus on, which is the candidates.

BROWNSTEIN: Right.

KRISTOL: Because the candidates in a demography-is-destiny type politics, candidates matter less. It's harder to swim against the trend. But of course on the margin –

BROWNSTEIN: That's the thing.

KRISTOL: Where we're talking two, four, six percent –

BROWNSTEIN: Exactly right.

KRISTOL: – one percent, or half-a-percent in the Wisconsin and Michigan of the world, candidates matter a lot.

And I think the other part of Republican over confidence, if it is over confidence, might be, well, you know, how are the Democrats going to hold their coalition? It's not so easy for the Democrats. Best case for the Democrats is House races. And that's where they did best. You can run your moderate Republican who's a CIA veteran or a military veteran in certain parts of Virginia and you can run Ocasio-Cortez in Queens Bronx, you know, and everyone gets to think that the party is what they want it to be.

BROWNSTEIN: Yes.

KRISTOL: But now you can't do that in a presidential race, because you have to have one nominee, not, you know, dozens of nominees.

BROWNSTEIN: And it is tougher.

KRISTOL: So that I think is also difficult. And whatever you think of Trump, he's been through it, he's there. Let's get to the Republican Party and whether there can be a change there too, but I think for the Trump defenders, they would say, you know, "and he was going to lose last time and look what happened."

So what about the Democrats? What happens over the next two years? What happens in the Presidential primaries?

BROWNSTEIN: And that, by the way, that point that the Republicans make along the way is totally fair. I mean, it is, Trump in 2020 could be more formidable than we saw the distribution of the national House popular vote, but particularly in those Rustbelt states where he eked out the victory last time.

Look, I think this election really underscores the basic strategic choice facing the Democrats because they saw evidence on both sides of the ledger. I mean, as I said before, I mean, I think the basic choice for Democrats is do you try to mobilize the non-voters who are the most alienated from Trump, young people, minorities, especially young minorities, or do you try to reassure the millions of center right white voters who normally vote Republican, mostly college educated, who just can't abide Trump on personal and cultural and racial grounds?

And this election gave you plenty of evidence for both, right? On the one hand you saw Democrats winning according to the exit polls a majority of college-educated whites, their best performance ever among college white women, a totally competitive performance among college white men, and as we've said in the upper Midwest states you even saw a little bit of erosion for Trump among the working-class, white women.

So that would say to you, okay, well, you know, if we have someone who can, all of these pieces are now loose, they've been dislodged from the Republican coalition and we just got to put our arms around them and pull them in, and that is about a nominee who's greatest strength is reassurance.

And I will stop here and say that it is never entirely an either or proposition. I mean, every nominee, potential nominee does a little bit of both. But clearly Michael Bloomberg or Joe Biden has a different set of strengths than Kamala Harris and Corey Booker. I mean, there's an emphasis. So one of –

KRISTOL: And just to get to that Rustbelt states for a minute, the actual people who won there –

BROWNSTEIN: Were really meat and potatoes Democrats.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

BROWNSTEIN: Really boring.

KRISTOL: Right.

BROWNSTEIN: Really boring.

KRISTOL: Bob Casey, Jr., in Pennsylvania.

BROWNSTEIN: Fix the damn roads. I mean, it was –

KRISTOL: That was her message. Not a lot of –

BROWNSTEIN: It was three yards and a cloud of dust.

KRISTOL: Right.

BROWNSTEIN: And, in fact, in those states, you know, the reassurance is one theory. The other theory as you said is mobilization, which is you turn out more younger, particularly younger non-white voters really is what we're talking about above all, who don't usually participate and you know they're going to vote four- five-to-one Democratic, which is much bigger margins than you're talking about among these center right whites who, you know, on a good day you're going to get to 54/46 or 55/46 is your goal.

Now there are geographic implications to this demographic choice also, because clearly a mobilization strategy is what you would need to put into play most of these Sunbelt states that we're talking about. And that's certainly Texas, certainly Arizona, North Carolina, Georgia, Florida is kind of a little bit of both.

And then on the other hand, the reassurance – there isn't really a mobilization path fundamentally to reclaiming the Rustbelt, I don't think. I mean, yes, you have to improve black turnout in Milwaukee and Detroit from what it was last time, but mostly this is about you're dealing with a constraint of an electorate. You're not going to vastly – it's not Georgia where you have the potential to radically, or Texas, where you could radically change the electorate, depending on who the nominee is.

KRISTOL: So why wouldn't the pro-reassurance people listening to you here say, "Look, this isn't even a close call. We had – you're never going to mobilize people more than you did with Gillum as the Governor candidate in Florida, Abrams in Georgia or Beto in Texas. And we lost all of those."

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah.

KRISTOL: So why isn't this kind of an obvious call that you've got to go for reassurance, go for the Midwest states, don't obviously fight Florida and Arizona, and actually Sinema in Arizona was sort of a reassurance candidate.

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah, she was. She was more of a reassurance –

KRISTOL: Presented herself that way.

BROWNSTEIN: And the mobilization candidate for Governor got kind of waxed.

KRISTOL: So, yeah–

BROWNSTEIN: Look, I think the evidence from the 2018 tilts, I will say tilts, towards reassurance in part because the evidence of erosion for Trump in the three states that were critical to his victory is pretty significant – in terms of Democrats winning both the governorship and the Senate, but also the exit polls showing his approval stuck at 47 or below in all three, and erosion not only among the college, but also the non-college women. I mean, that's a pretty compelling set of evidence.

On the other hand, I'll give you the other hand, which is, you know, yes, Beto O'Rourke lost in Texas, Stacey Abrams lost in Georgia, and Gillum lost in Florida, little different in his case. But in the case of Beto and Stacey Abrams, when was the last time any Democrat got to 48 percent in either of those states?

I mean, I think in a major race, you may have to go back to Ann Richards in 1990 in Texas, and Roy Barnes in '98 in Georgia, so you say, okay, –

KRISTOL: Right, in think in fact the Democrats in Texas, if I'm not mistaken, someone made this point to me, "Could Beto win?" I actually thought maybe he could, and a very savvy Democratic consultant – this was the typical green room conversation before going on a show – said, "Look off the record, I mean, no. No Democrat state-wide has gotten above 42 percent, I think it might have been, in Texas – "

BROWNSTEIN: Probably since the '90s.

KRISTOL: Since '94 when Ann Richards was sort of competitive –

BROWNSTEIN: She got 46 [percent] in '94.

KRISTOL: In her reelection. And I may have that number slightly off.

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah.

KRISTOL: But, I mean, it's not off by much.

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah, John Sharp in '98 running for Lieutenant Governor may have been the last one to get close to what Beto got.

KRISTOL: So not in 20 years.

BROWNSTEIN: Right, right. And –

KRISTOL: And he said, "Look, so therefore how much can you get above 42?" He did not think you could get to 48 from 42.

BROWNSTEIN: 48 and a half I believe.

KRISTOL: And I suppose the argument on that side is, if you can get to 48, can't you get to 50?

BROWNSTEIN: Again the one –

KRISTOL: In a presidential year.

BROWNSTEIN: Yes, and that's the point, right? So the reason why the mobilization strategy is not inherently weaker than the reassurance strategy is because more young people will vote. Even though more young people voted than usual in the midterm, more young people still will vote in the presidential and it will be significantly more. Okay? And with the right nominee it could be, you know, significantly more plus.

So I would think that these results, the fact that none, if any of the big three had won, Gillum, Abrams or Beto O'Rourke, I think the momentum in the Democratic Party towards the mobilization strategy would have been really hard to resist, because I think, at its heart, that's what the party wants to run on.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

BROWNSTEIN: The party wants to run on mobilizing the emerging diverse America to stand up and say to Donald Trump, "We belong here." That's what it wants to run on. And, you know, that isn't what they did run on in 2018. They ran on preexisting conditions and meat and potatoes, and they avoided that big kind of "flags unfurled, flapping in the wind, this is a cultural fight for the meaning of America," because understanding that a lot of the places they had to win, they weren't sure they would win that debate.

And, in fact, you could certainly make that case about Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, Pennsylvania is a little different, but Michigan and Wisconsin. I don't know if you win that debate if that's the grounds on which you want to fight.

But that to me is the grounds on which the Democratic Party does want to fight, where the base of the party – What is the moment where Beto O'Rourke became a national phenomenon, right? Wasn't it when he, in a town hall, a leading question encouraging him to condemn the NFL protesters, he gave this impassioned defense, that there is nothing more American.

And that is what the Democratic Party wants to run – I think that the activist base in the Democratic Party wants the 2020 campaign to be a moment where diverse, emerging America says to Trump that your racism is unacceptable.

KRISTOL: Right. Full-throated repudiation of Trump. And I would say the activist base even wants to say, "And incidentally, that's always been under the surface of the Republican Party."

BROWNSTEIN: Yes. Yes.

KRISTOL: "And this is just exposing this terrible aspect of America, and we need to flat out repudiate it."

BROWNSTEIN: And all the people that –

KRISTOL: And that's a tough way to win over people who've been voting Republican much of their lives.

BROWNSTEIN: And right. And all the people who, you know, are in charge of actually electing a House did not, they did everything to avoid having that fight. They did not have that. I mean, you know, Katie Porter in Orange County. The vast majority of Democratic candidates avoided the cultural confrontation with Trump and stuck to preexisting conditions and defending health care, defending Medicare.

Okay, now I don't know if you can do that in 2020.

KRISTOL: And there were ads up from Republican Women for Progress – and I was told by one Democrat who [said they were] pretty effective in ten different Congressional districts – which were explicitly women from these districts, saying, “Hi, I'm Jane Jones, I voted Republican for the last 10 or 20 years. I am a Republican, but I can't abide this Republican Party, I can't abide what Trump has done.”

BROWNSTEIN: Right.

KRISTOL: So an explicit defense of the old Republicans almost –

BROWNSTEIN: Yes.

KRISTOL: And then saying but it's okay to vote Democratic this time. So that's a very different message.

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah, I don't think you can, I don't think there can be a Democrat – first of all, I think the Democratic ticket – To me, the likeliest outcome is one from column A, one from column B. A reassurance candidate, and a mobilization candidate. And the big question would be which is on the top of the ticket?

I mean, if it's Biden, certainly Kamala Harris or Beto O'Rourke. I mean, he's going to pick someone younger who reflects kind of the activist energy. If they go the other way, if it's Kamala Harris or Beto O'Rourke who are the nominee, that is more interesting. Do they pick Sherrod Browne who would be the logical balance to one of them? Or do they just double down like Clinton did in '92 when he did the generational change with Gore?

I mean, you could imagine, I could easily imagine a Joe Biden/Kamala Harris ticket. If I had to pick one ticket today that would be the strongest, that's probably the one I would pick. However, I could also imagine a Kamala Harris/Beto O'Rourke ticket. Like I don't know if that's the right call, because is that a ticket that can hold Michigan and take back Wisconsin? I don't know.

But you could see where you could decide to do that. I could also decide to do Kamala Harris and Sherrod Browne. I mean, you could – these two pieces will likely both find expression I think on the ticket, with the one exception that ala Clinton/Gore you could imagine mobilize/mobilize. Like we're going all the way. We're just – we are the new America. We are the emerging next America, metro America, look at us, see yourself and repudiate the kind of overt Wallace-like racism that Trump is offering as a way of trying to divide the country.

You know, that, that would be an election for the ages. That would be like the 1860 election or something, but higher risk. I mean, the other one is kind of a lower risk, don't you think?

KRISTOL: Yes, but –

BROWNSTEIN: A lower risk strategy.

KRISTOL: But of course the way the nominating process works, is not –

BROWNSTEIN: No one controls it.

KRISTOL: Right, it's not like, you know, Paul Begala and David Axelrod and some gray beards from previous administrations get to sit around and say, “You know, I think this is a rational way of – ”

BROWNSTEIN: I think if we polled –

KRISTOL: So talk about the actual next year in terms of – you got a bunch of, 25 candidates, god knows how many exploring.

BROWNSTEIN: Right.

KRISTOL: Fifteen run, I suppose. Donors, activists. How does that dynamic look to you? Both sort of generally, and then in terms of particular people? What should we be looking for?

BROWNSTEIN: I mean, I think chaotic, obviously at the beginning. But Biden running or not is a big piece.

KRISTOL: So that's initial I agree.

BROWNSTEIN: I agree, that's a big kind of fork. If he runs he's kind of the central focal point, the assumed front runner. And either he gets knocked out or he doesn't. I mean, I covered each of his presidential races. He was not good, either time. Even before he was forced out with the health problems and the Neil Kinnock plagiarism issue. The first time in the '80s, and certainly in 2008, didn't make a big impression.

However he matches up well, I think, in the Trump era because he provides irreverence, a certain amount of irreverence. He doesn't seem like a starch pol, but vastly more competence. He's actually not a bad matchup against Trump. And he has the potential to be reassuring not only to white-collar whites, but some, maybe not vast, but some blue-collar whites.

And as I said we should file away that he's – Pennsylvania was a place where the Democrats did regain more ground among working-class whites. I think Pennsylvania is really hard for Trump. Biden is the first primary choice.

KRISTOL: And he'll decide, people seem to think –

BROWNSTEIN: Early next year.

KRISTOL: Yeah. Very early, like the end of January so that's probably a moment first.

Bloomberg? Are you aware – to take the other old famous person. Do you take that seriously as a Democratic –?

BROWNSTEIN: I think Bloomberg has shown himself to be – he puts mega tonnage behind his ideas so you can't completely dismiss him, I don't think. But, having said that, given that Beto, Stacey Abrams and Andrew Gillum were the three, that's where the energy was in the Democratic party in 2018. A white guy in his '70s who has stop-and-frisk in his past – that's a hard – that one in particular, the criminal justice stuff.

Again, the heart of the Democratic party right now is defending this diverse America. And a lot of the Clintonian – and Biden is not going to be immune to this from the crime bill – a lot of the Clintonian kind of opportunity/responsibility nexus, which in my mind produces some pretty good policy, but now looks like pandering to white racial resentments to a lot of the Democratic party. That's going to be a big thing for Biden. More with white liberals, probably, than with African-Americans, actually – maybe younger African-Americans as opposed to older.

You can imagine a bunch of others in this category. John Hickenlooper probably isn't vastly different, or Terry McAuliffe, or if Andrew Cuomo wakes up and decides to run. A lot of them are in that group. I personally think it's going to be harder than people expect for Elizabeth Warren or Bernie Sanders;

because the history of white Progressives who cannot get African-Americans to vote for them is that they don't win. It's pretty simple. It's not that complicated.

Whether it's Bill Bradley or Gary Hart, it just doesn't work. The math doesn't add up. African-American voters are kind of the ballast of the Democratic primary. They're not a liberal fringe; they are the ballast. They kind of are a regulator.

KRISTOL: They don't show up in the first two states, so it can be a little misleading.

BROWNSTEIN: And then they sort things out.

KRISTOL: And then suddenly people go South and realize, "Woah".

BROWNSTEIN: Obama was polling I think roughly 50/50 with Hilary Clinton among African-Americans until he won Iowa. They wanted proof that he was viable.

If you have, you say, "Okay, the reassuring are mostly white men – you know, kind of the progressive older whites. And then you have kind of the younger diverse candidates, of whom I think Kamala Harris is the most formidable, potentially, as a woman, I don't know. I'm making these numbers up slightly, but I'm guessing college white women and African-American women between them are something like 35-40% of the democratic primary – maybe even more, maybe north of 40. So you have someone who can appeal to both of those groups. If it came down to Kamala Harris versus Elizabeth Warren one-on-one, I would put my money on Kamala Harris. I think demographically she has a wider reach.

And then you have Cory Booker, you have Deval Patrick. The biggest wildcard has been O'Rourke.

KRISTOL: Say a little bit about that. That's not just a media phenomenon –

BROWNSTEIN: No.

KRISTOL: – that he can lose and then run for President.

BROWNSTEIN: Well, Abe Lincoln did it.

KRISTOL: Lincoln, yes. The Lincoln analogy.

BROWNSTEIN: There's only one example, but it's a good one. Maybe there's other examples. I don't know of another example.

KRISTOL: No. I think it's fairly unique.

BROWNSTEIN: Of course, to complete the analogy, Ted Cruz would have to primary and beat Trump and then it would be like Stephen Douglas beating Lincoln in 1858, and then Lincoln beating him two years later.

I think that there is a generational lane, as well, in the Democratic party and in the general election. I think I've said to you before, I don't know if I've said it on camera, that Gary Hart at '84 is a good candidate against Trump. You don't have to run "left/right" against Trump. You can just run "future/past." Somebody could basically say, "It's great that he's re-opening coal mines. How many of you in the audience think your kid is going to go to work in a coal mine? Let's talk about the future."

If I had a bet today, my three frontrunners for the Democratic nomination are Biden, Kamala Harris and Beto O'Rourke. I don't have Elizabeth Warren in there because I think she taps out, and maybe she's a finalist if she runs, but I think she taps out, myself, but I could be wrong. I think she is a relatively weak

choice to put up against Trump, for a lot of reasons. But I think Biden, Harris and Beto O'Rourke all – Biden being the reassurance candidate, Harris being the mobilization candidate. And Beto being more of the Gary Hart future/past – a whole different lens on the election, but more mobilization than reassurance certainly. I think they are each intriguing options for Democrats and it would not surprise me if two of those three are on the ticket in 2020, unless Beto decides to run against Cornyn.

KRISTOL: Do you think the younger, I guess “reassurance” candidates, which I would say are Michael Bennet, the Senator of Colorado, or Mitch Landrieu, the former Senator of New Orleans. Do they go anywhere over there?

BROWNSTEIN: I think it's hard for them. Sherrod Brown's the one who's kind of interesting.

KRISTOL: Yeah, because he cuts across a little bit.

BROWNSTEIN: He cuts across. He's acceptable, I think, to the Bernie Sanders side, but he is rumpled enough and he's shown enough appeal to blue-collar that he has some elements of reassurance. I think he is popular in the African-American community in his home state, although what that would mean against Kalama Harris, say, or Cory Booker is probably limited. Again, once they establish their viability. I don't think the African-American Democratic primary voters have not shown that they take flyers. They want to know that their vote matters.

Julian Castro is kind of interesting, and he's someone maybe we'll be talking about if Beto decides to run for Senate in 2020. But I kind of think of those are the big three in my mind, actually: Biden, Harris, and O'Rourke.

KRISTOL: There's probably someone we haven't even mentioned. In the Trump –

BROWNSTEIN: There's Howard Shultz. There are more. Most of those we haven't mentioned are reassuring white guys, business guys who would kind of – I don't think that's where the party's heart is.

KRISTOL: No. I mean one of the questions is the party wants someone who will denounce Trump as he deserves to be denounced as they see it. Or someone who will try to tell a few Trump voters, “Hey, look. I understand why you went that way in 2016. It wasn't crazy. There's a lot to be upset about it, but I'm really going to drain the swamp and clean things up.” That's a very different tone. You could combine them a little bit.

BROWNSTEIN: 2018: they picked the latter mostly. There were a few people did the former. Gillum was one who did the former. Again, I think the political professionals would probably prefer the latter. The heart of the party wants the former. And one advantage Biden has is he kind of does both.

Can I tell you something about that? It's easy to imagine Biden basically going into working-class communities and saying, “Trump is selling you short. He thinks you're all a bunch of racists. He thinks that he can give tax breaks to his rich friends and divert you by making nasty comments about Mexicans and African-Americans. You know what? I know you. I grew up on the block. And Mr. O'Connor down the block, if a guy did his job on the line next to him, he didn't care if he was black, or white, or yellow or green.”

He can basically do both: he could go into working-class communities, attack Trump as racist without attacking them, basically saying, “Trump is selling you short.” He has options that other Democrats don't in terms of how to straddle that.

But I don't think you get away, as I've said probably five times, I don't think you get away from being a Democratic nominee in 2020 without directly accusing Trump of using racism to divide the country. I think that is the *sine qua non* the party is going to demand of its nominee.

KRISTOL: And we'll come back to that in a second because it's so interesting. We say "generally" and people like us talk "reassurance" versus "mobilization," or confrontation or whatever, but, of course, that always manifests itself in some issues, or a set of issues or maybe a symbolic moment. For Clinton, it would have been welfare reform, I would say, and the Sister Souljah, in a sense which made him a new Democrat.

For all that people like us might have known of him, and he had a thinktank, he was interested in new Democratic ideas and he was surrounded by people who were interested in that – changing the Mondale-Dukakis trajectory of the party, for the voters that needed to have the expression, I think one question would be: "What could the expression of that on either side be?"

I want to get back to that in a second. But, on the Biden, it would be ironic, I suppose, if Biden having run twice and lost, this is actually the best time for him, personally and for his message, but maybe he's just too old.

BROWNSTEIN: 2016, in retrospect, looks like a pretty good time.

KRISTOL: And Jerry Brown is the other person who's run, what, two or three times?

BROWNSTEIN: Right. Three.

KRISTOL: Three.

BROWNSTEIN: '76, '80 and '92.

KRISTOL: He had pretty good races a couple times, won some states.

BROWNSTEIN: '76 he did really well. '76 he won a bunch of states.

KRISTOL: Now, if either of those people were five to ten years younger.

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah. Jerry Brown, especially.

KRISTOL: Sitting two-term Governor of California, he stays in good shape.

BROWNSTEIN: Jerry Brown would be perfect to run against Trump. Again, Jerry Brown, even in his 60s could do future/past. Because I do think that there is this, as I said, the most logical frame to run against Trump is left/right, but there is just a whole other – like McCrone is a good candidate against Trump. And Gary Hart, '84. The way Gary Hart would have run against Reagan, someone can run against Trump.

III: On the Issues (1:22:21 – 1:38:35)

KRISTOL: So what issues – I think what you said: that you need to be indignant about his divisiveness, and use of race, and the attacks on immigrants, I suppose –

BROWNSTEIN: Women. Right. *Horseface*.

KRISTOL: Women. I mean, that's fair enough to be indignant about that.

But I've been struggling I guess let's just say, speaking to various random audiences, that "Medicare for All" stuff has become like a symbolic – no one even knows what it is exactly.

BROWNSTEIN: I am in the wrong camp on this because I think there's a pretty easy way out.

KRISTOL: Yeah. You agree it's become a weird almost litmus test?

BROWNSTEIN: Yes. But, here's the question: if you run on a – "Medicare for All" means a lot of different things for people. If you mean "Medicare for All" meaning: single-player healthcare in which the government eliminates private insurance and has to raise taxes by over a trillion dollars to do so. That is a big burden to carry into the general elections. Whatever people poll on it now, the case against it hasn't been made, and I think if you make the case against it, I don't think you can win that argument.

But I don't think you have to win that argument, because I think there's an intermediary step that really, to me, threads the needle pretty easily, which would be acceptable in a Democratic primary and defensible in a general election, and that is: a "Medicare Buy-in for All." Essentially, Medicare does not replace private insurance, but you allow more people to buy into Medicare on the private exchanges, maybe starting at 55 and lowering it over time. It's an expanded public option and it seems to me – and I wouldn't be surprised if that emerges legislatively in the next two years.

KRISTOL: My gut instinct is similar to that, which I'll just generalize. I don't think the basic policies issues end up being wildly divisive. Now, stuff could emerge in the next few months that would greatly divide the Democratic party. You can imagine a foreign policy fight or an intervention.

BROWNSTEIN: The trade stuff may be. See how that plays out.

KRISTOL: The trade stuff maybe. One sort of feels like the cultural indicator is that some Democrat, if he wanted to go to the center would find a way, that would be Sister Souljah, to show that he's in favor, he's against excessive political correctness, he's against intolerance of the left, he's in favor of letting conservative scholars speak on campus, and in some way of sort of signaling –

BROWNSTEIN: And Trump makes that so hard.

KRISTOL: Well, that's the question.

BROWNSTEIN: That's the problem.

KRISTOL: And then on the other side, on the progressive side, what becomes their way of signaling that they're not like the old, accommodationist Democrats who've gotten crushed, who've been ineffectual, in their view?

BROWNSTEIN: You expand the Supreme Court? I don't know.

KRISTOL: That's what I wonder. Something like that. You can imagine it.

BROWNSTEIN: There are 25 candidates. Someone will probably run on it.

KRISTOL: Totally, and I've wondered about that. Why wouldn't that be – There are well-known professors at Harvard Law School and elsewhere who are defending it, given [what] McConnell [did].

BROWNSTEIN: Steve Calabresei wanted term limits, but that needs a Constitutional amendment, so that's harder. You could imagine it.

KRISTOL: Mike Klarman said given what McConnell did –

BROWNSTEIN: Make Puerto Rico a state. Make Puerto Rico and D.C. states.

KRISTOL: Exactly. Real one person, one vote. Given what McConnell did in 2016, given Kavanaugh as they see it and all that. With Roosevelt he didn't lay the groundwork for it; of course, it was a big mistake, or people think it was. But, I totally agree with that.

BROWNSTEIN: Voting rights, the new voting rights act. The voting rights will be in the center.

KRISTOL: I agree. If even one semi-fringy candidate does expand the Supreme Court, maybe two months later, half of them are for it. So it's a very dynamic process.

BROWNSTEIN: I think the Democratic nominee of 2020 will go through the same kind of weighing and costs and balances that we saw in the House races in 2018.

On the one hand, as we've said, what the party most wants is a full-throated defense of diverse new America against Trump's attempt to divide along racial grounds. And so, you can imagine different ways in which that plays out besides condemning Trump: a new voting rights act, commitment to police reform, a lot. So that will be there.

The harder question is: beyond saying I'm going to defend Medicare and Medicaid, and I'm going to defend the ACA, what is, if anything, your economic agenda for Trump country and these blue-collar whites you're trying to win back at least a few of?

People say that Hilary had no agenda for these folks. I think that's not quite right. It got subsumed, obviously, because she wanted to talk only about Trump being morally unfit to be President. But she really had a whole bunch of stuff about helping people balance work and home, which is very relevant to blue-collar families about expanded pre-care, and expanded childcare, tax credits – all that kind of stuff.

So what do you say if you're basically, okay, you're going to say to working-class, white women in these key midwestern states, you're going to say that, "If you re-elect the Republicans, they're coming for your healthcare, and if you re-elect the Republicans, they're going to go after your Medicare and Social Security because they have to pay for their tax cut." What's the third thing you say to them? What do you say to them about how I'm going to make your life better. I think you end up in the same place Clinton did. You end up back in, "I'm going to help you balance work and home." That's kind of missing. Right? What is the new –

KRISTOL: But constrained by a big budget deficit. Maybe there will be a little bit of a recession and suddenly it gets bigger. And they don't want to cut defense spending.

BROWNSTEIN: I'll raise the corporate tax rate two points to fund universal pre-K.

KRISTOL: But they're on a slightly dangerous, even though I think it's perfectly respectable for the liberal economics to complain about a lot of the Trump tax cut, and for politicians to denounce parts of it. That's traditionally a slippery slope for Democrats to start down, because voters think, "They say they'll raise that one little tax, but you know what? The Democrats love raising taxes."

BROWNSTEIN: I've talked to enough Democrats who felt that – again, and this is goes to your history, when you were writing your memos in the early 1990s against Clinton Care, and you were worried that Stan Greenberg was right. Because Stan Greenberg and Democrats said, "Look. We're going show the white, working-class that the government doesn't exist only to take their money and give it to people they think don't deserve it. We're going to give them a tangible budget." And I remember in your memos, you warned about the political implications if they succeeded in doing that.

Fast forward 25 years, the universal pre-K and the tuition-free public university were modern manifestations of that same impulse among Democrats. Saying we have to show middle- and lower middle-income white people that their tax dollars will produce something tangible. They have not sold

that. Particularly, the universal tuition-free college is not viewed, I believe, that positively by the swing voters.

So if that is not the way to convince them that a Democratic economic agenda will benefit them and their kids, the question of “What is?” looms kind of big. Because I don’t think there is another – unless I’ve missed it in the last two years, there’s not some other set of ideas. Maybe it’s more about working in vocational training, and people don’t like the idea that their kids have to go to college because it makes you feel like they’re looking down on you because you didn’t.

But Democrats have not solved that piece of it. And again, I think 80% of the election is going to be culture, myself.

KRISTOL: Let’s talk about the cultural stuff. On O’Rourke, and you followed it more closely than I did I’m sure, he both defended Kaepernick and kneeling during the National Anthem. But also didn’t he at one point rebuke people for sort of yelling at Ted Cruz in a restaurant? And he was sort of McCain-like in his respect for the tradition. “McCain-like” is too strong, but he didn’t present himself as a –

BROWNSTEIN: He affirmed the new America without condemning Trump.

KRISTOL: The old.

BROWNSTEIN: Or the old, right. And that is a way to go. And Biden would do that, although Biden would condemn Trump. Biden would try to separate Trump from his supporters.

KRISTOL: But he would defend the old America as well as the new.

BROWNSTEIN: He would. Biden would. And I don’t know if Harris or Booker could do that.

KRISTOL: So that’s I think a big distinction among the Democrats.

BROWNSTEIN: That is a big distinction. Right.

KRISTOL: And I think that doesn’t just get to those working-class votes they need in those upper Midwest states, but it gets to the college-educated white voters.

BROWNSTEIN: Men.

KRISTOL: And some of the women.

BROWNSTEIN: I think the women are – don’t forget, Trumpism is about resisting cultural and demographic change in every form. If you look at the polling, not only are Trump voters uneasy about more immigrants and all that, or much less Black protestors in the NFL, they’re also pretty uneasy about the changing role of women. Including the women Trump supporters! Women Trump supporters are much more likely than women Clinton supporters to say that the trend to work outside the house has made it harder to raise the kids, harder to have healthy marriages, all of that.

If you’re a college. white women, this is what we’ve learned, in a suburb anywhere, you’re looking at this whole package and saying, “It is denigrating me. It is saying that I am somehow wrong. I’m making the wrong choices for my family. I’m kind of undermining what the country should be.” Everybody got the joke. Everybody who is the implicit target of Trump’s appeals to restoration understood what he was doing.

KRISTOL: I talked to some Republicans, Kavanaugh for instance, which probably helped Republicans in the red states as a cultural thing – fight. I think even in the swing congressional districts in Northern

Virginia where I live, Democrats I knew were relieved the Kavanaugh thing ended and went away because there were college-educated whites including women, especially the men, but even including the women, it was sort of like, “Sheesh, we can’t just have people making a charge from 30 years ago.” I mean, everyone ridiculed what Trump said, that, “That could be your husband. That could be your son.” But, of course, people really were thinking that, too.

BROWNSTEIN: I know in the polling there was a huge gap between college and non-college, white women and who they believed: Blasey-Ford or Trump, I mean Kavanaugh.

Yes, I think you’re right. That goes with the larger thing. Democrats did not want to have the cultural fight in 2018 and I think the professionals, by and large, are not going to really want to have it in 2020.

KRISTOL: Right. “Professionals” meaning the operatives?

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah. Because I think they will view that everyone who is motivated by that understands. They recognize that Trump is targeting them and they will show up. And that the last people you need are more likely, as you said before, to be offended than drawn to you on that.

With the exception – you can answer this, I think part of the problem Republicans have now in the Trump era is that in white-collar suburban America, you cannot wear a MAGA hat to a party. It is culturally unacceptable. You are basically saying, “I am okay with George Wallace-like arguments from the White House.” And it’s become culturally delegitimized, I think, because Trump has so overtly, calling, “That’s a stupid question. That’s a racist question. Maxine Waters: ‘low-IQ individual’.” The degree to which he has stripped any veil from what he is doing. “The caravan is coming.” “Democrats want open borders.” What did he say? “They’re going to be taking over your towns.”

I thought in some ways, the most memorable single quote from a voter in the whole 2018 election was that women in Minnesota at a Trump rally who said, “All the vacation homes up on the lakes are left unattended all winter, what’s to stop the caravan from coming in and occupying them? And I’m going to go back there next spring and there’s going to be a Honduran mother and her daughter living in my cabin.” Okay. Great. Great, for where that is. In Northern Virginia, the price of that is: don’t wear your MAGA hat in public.

KRISTOL: I do think on the caravan it was interesting to the degree it backfired. And I don’t know if we really don’t know if it did. It seems to have backfired post-election, at least. A lot of that though was because he deployed the troops, so the Democrats got to be pro-respecting the military, “Don’t misuse the military.”

BROWNSTEIN: “Backfire” is the wrong word. It intensified like everything else. It certainly helped them in the places where the red states – And in the House they did draw the line, they did build a firewall at the outer suburbs. The Democrats penetrated hardly any beyond that.

KRISTOL: It could have been 50 or 60 seats if they really had a collapse, and they didn’t.

BROWNSTEIN: They did not have a collapse in rural America, but they had a comprehensive collapse in suburban American. Without the gerrymanderers in Ohio, North Carolina and Texas, the suburban swell would have taken another seven or eight seats. It would have been close to 50. You look at the results, for example, in Franklin County, Columbus, in that rematch of the Balderson-O’Connor thing, the Democrat got 60% plus, again, in Franklin, but there was enough rural attached to it.

Same thing in North Carolina in the seats around Charlotte and Raleigh where those areas want even more Democrat, there was enough rural. Now, Trump can win those states that way again in 2020 because there is enough rural to offset. But, again, I look at an Arizona, there isn’t.

KRISTOL: Yeah, but I do think somehow, this is where the cultural stuff gets so complicated in a way. Can you be sorta pro-military? Hilary tried that not very effectively in 2016, I guess. The most pro-military convention of *either* party. But maybe there are other ways to do that. It is a risk if the Democrats look like they are simply the party of –

BROWNSTEIN: Kind of the changing America. Because you don't know –

KRISTOL: The changing American and a changing America that has contempt for the old, and will, in effect, persecute the old for just being the way they've been. So if you've said something 30 years ago somewhere – I'm exaggerating a little – or your kid says something in a class that your teacher doesn't like, suddenly you're going to be hauled up in court or something. You can't be *persecuting* old America.

BROWNSTEIN: And the reality is: unless you're going to mobilize enough of the new voters to win Georgia, Florida, Texas, Arizona. You can't win that way. There is no escaping the need to recapture – if you can't replace it with Sun Belt mobilization – there's no escaping the need to have rustbelt reassurance, right? You cannot have working-class, white voters, especially women – the men are gone. They're gone, gone, gone even in this election. A little better in Wisconsin, but the other two were still like comparable to anywhere else, 70% of non-college white men voted Republican in Pennsylvania, roughly. 70% approved of Trump at least.

So you can't make the Electoral College add up unless you can convince a certain share, you go back to what we were talking about: unless you can levitate in the upper-Midwest above your national number among working-class white voters. So, yeah, you can't have them thinking that you think they are kind of retrograde. There has to be a place for them, and that's not easy. It's not easy to condemn Trump's appeals to racism without implying that his supporters are okay with it, which many of them are.

KRISTOL: That's where I think the generational thing could allow the Democrats to square the circle a little bit. They sort of embody the new America but without – O'Rourke seemed like he was better at that – without condemning the old.

BROWNSTEIN: I don't think this would be unusually hard for Biden. I think it would be hard for a lot other people – very hard.

KRISTOL: I mean Amy Klobucher. There are sort of individuals like Mike Bennet. They're just not well-known and it's hard to know if they could ever really – if Biden didn't run, I suppose, one of them might emerge. Landrieu's Confederate Monument speech is probably the actual best example of that, as Mayor of a southern city, obviously New Orleans.

BROWNSTEIN: Right. You can see that. There are ways to do it. It's just hard because there's somebody on the other side of the net. Trump is going to take your words, whatever you say, and portray them as disrespecting not only him, but his voters.

KRISTOL: Right.

BROWNSTEIN: He's going to take whatever you say, however you try to chastise or constrain Trump for his appeals to racial resentments, he's going to take it and say, "The Democrats think you're racists."

IV: A Primary Challenge to Trump? (1:38:35 – 2:01:08)

KRISTOL: And on the Republican side, briefly, I can make an argument, I've seen polling and focus groups that suggest there's a little less support for Trump than you think, and people can approve of Trump retrospectively, but not be confident about re-nominating or re-electing him. I do think there will be a primary challenge, and it'll be more substantial than people think.

Having said that, are you going to pour cold water here on my hopes and tell me that basically not much evidence of an intra-party rebellion against Trump at this point?

BROWNSTEIN: Look, I think the divide is very clear. College and non-college Republicans are now roughly have of the primary each. Trump dominated non-college Republicans in 2016, but he only won a third of college-educated Republicans even in 2016.

It's the first time we've had a split between the college and non-college side and the non-college side won. So, Romney and McCain both had exactly the opposite profile. If you look at the total exit poll, cumulative for the whole thing, they each won half of the college Republicans and one-third of the non. You had Santorum and Huckabee as more of the non. Trump always – it wasn't like the college side of the Republican party overwhelmingly embraced him to begin with.

KRISTOL: They voted for him in 2016 against Hilary. Judges and –

BROWNSTEIN: Against Hillary. And in this election, clearly, Independent voters who normally vote Republican, college-educated Independent white voters who normally vote Republican – many of them voted Democratic.

The most likely outcome of a primary challenge is with the right nominee – the right challenger – you could mobilize a substantial portion of the college side of the Republican party against Trump, particularly where Independents can vote. And you would get a decent vote among, but you might win them 60/40 and then lose the non-college side 80/20.

The non-college embrace of Trump in the Republican party makes it hard to imagine him losing the nomination. But that doesn't mean to me, as I think I've said to you before, that a primary challenge is meaningless, because if a challenger in the primary is able to reinforce the message of 2018, which is that: There is a price to this, guys. Look at just what happened in Northern Virginia, and Southern New Hampshire, and the suburbs of New York and Orange County in California in the primaries.

In all of these white-collar places, half of more of Republican voters said, "We don't want this." Okay, yeah, the majority of the party says they don't want it, but you can't win national elections with all of those people getting off the bus.

And I've said to you before, you don't have to prove you're a majority of the party as a dissenting force. You just have to prove that the party can't win without you, I think. And I think that is what 2018 proved, though very few Republicans are kind of accepting that. And I think a 2020 primary challenge – whether or not it dislodges Trump, could show, could really underscore, highlight, put neon marking around the depth of the college, white normally Republican recoiling from him in a way that I think becomes harder for the party to ignore.

KRISTOL: And what events do you think could happen in 2019? I guess two categories: real world events (recession, foreign policy crises, Mueller) or political events, I guess which would have to do with how the House, and the Senate and the Presidency interact, that would either strengthen or weaken – I'm curious in general what you think. How much are we set on a path for 2020 and these events will happen on the side and basically the two armies are marching down the road anyway. Or how much do the events really affect what happens in general? And then I think particularly on the intra-Republican side, I'm curious.

BROWNSTEIN: I mostly think the two armies are marching down the road, but obviously big events are big events. Donald Trump is at 40-45 with 4% unemployment. He'll be a little lower. I don't know if he'll be vastly lower, but he'll be a little lower if the economy is slower. And certainly Mueller – that matters. What he says will matter, and I think will matter – the kind of voters I'm talking about are the ones who pay the most attention to thinks like that.

Again, he's in kind of a precarious situation where he's not doomed by any means, but he's hardly thriving, and he hasn't had a full-scale foreign policy disaster yet. So I kind of think that all of those things are more downside risk than upside risk. Is the economy possibly going to be better in 2020? Is the world going to be more –? I suppose he could get a big concession out of China that would complicate the Democratic path in the Rust Belt. That could happen, I suppose. That could strengthen him.

But I think mostly we are heading for a cultural reckoning and division in which, at the margin, Democrats are hoping to persuade a relatively small number of white people in the Midwest who may lean toward Trump on culture that he really doesn't have your back on your economic interest, as kind of an important sideshow within that, but that the fundamental divide is the cultural division that we are just marching toward – not even marching toward, it's sort of like those medieval armies: we're assembling.

KRISTOL: We're in the trenches.

BROWNSTEIN: We're in the trenches. We're assembling. All the shields are going up and we're getting ready for the next time the two lines run into each other kind of like either *Braveheart* or *Lord of the Rings*.

KRISTOL: Clarence Thomas resigns from the Court in July of 2019. He's been there a long time – what, 28 years? Something like that.

BROWNSTEIN: '92 was he? '91. 28 years.

KRISTOL: And so there's another confirmation fight. Who does that help? Is it a big wildcard or is it just a thing that happens?

BROWNSTEIN: It does what this one did.

KRISTOL: Just reinforces everything.

BROWNSTEIN: It reinforces. It helps Republicans and small-town rural, and it compounds their problem in metro.

KRISTOL: Probably has some effect on the Democratic primary. I think if you're a reassurance candidate, your life is made harder by that, right?

BROWNSTEIN: It is made harder. Yeah. And again, Biden is the unique reassurance candidate because I think he can attack Trump while being a reassurance candidate; a little harder for the others, but yeah.

This idea that the coalition of transformation may represent an absolute majority of the population, but the other side will control the Supreme Court for the next 15 years is kind of a fuse. The Herb Stein rule: any trend that can't be sustained, won't be. The idea that for the next 15 years, essentially, a white male Republican block on the Supreme Court will be restricting the ability of this emerging America to advance its interest on everything from Affirmative Action to voting rights to criminal justice. I don't think you have 15 years of that. That's what the actuarial tables will tell you, but I say there will be some intervening political event, something like an effort to expand the Court.

KRISTOL: Switch and time.

BROWNSTEIN: The switch in time that saved nine.

KRISTOL: Roberts decides not to be.

BROWNSTEIN: Roberts decides not to allow an endless series of racially-charged 5-4 decisions because again, I'm not sure the filibuster will last through the rest of our lives.

KRISTOL: Yeah. Of course, unless Trump gets re-elected. And then it's a whole different question. Yeah. I tend to agree people just focus on the Court when there's a nomination or when there's one dramatic decision or couple at the end of term, but that's an underrated issue. In both parties. It helps Trump hugely among the Republicans.

BROWNSTEIN: The Shelby County decision and the voting rights will be a much bigger part of the Democratic party in 2020 than it was in 2016. The idea that creating national pushback against the Republican states that have done all sorts of things on voter ID, it's a very tangible way to kind of express your solidarity with the emerging America. And I guarantee you the Democratic nominee in 2020 will have a very robust answer for Brian Kemp as Secretary of State of Georgia or Texas. They will try to create national something, or promise national something.

KRISTOL: And finally, I guess, Mueller, and that is kind of a big inflection point. Let's assume more work comes out in two months. Let's just oversimplify: either it basically doesn't find something impeachable for Trump, or plausibly impeachable or it does. If it doesn't, Trump declares victory. "This was always a witch hunt, and I said it was a witch hunt and see. Fine, they indicted a few people for trivial violations of things," he'll say. How much of a victory is it for Trump? Does it really change the dynamics?

And conversely, if he finds something plausibly impeachable, then we do have a 2019, which – Our friends the Democrat strategists can sit all they want in green rooms and say, "I kind of don't want that." But what are they going to do? Say, "Well the Special Council," whom everyone has been praising to the skies for the last two years, "has found the following evidence of possible collusion and obstruction, but we're going to ignore it here in the House. Now that we control the House, we're not going to –" Doesn't Jerry Nadler have to have hearings?

BROWNSTEIN: Is it possible – I haven't thought this through entirely – but is it possible that it's basically self-correcting? That if Mueller doesn't find something, they have the excuse not to do anything. If Mueller does find something, it's Mueller, it's not them.

KRISTOL: Yes. Yes. But how much does it change American politics for 2020 if 2019 features impeachment, or possible impeachment or, you know, like Clinton in 2018 [sic 1998]? That's not impossible.

BROWNSTEIN: 1998.

KRISTOL: It's probably not likely, I would say. But is there one in four chance? Probably.

BROWNSTEIN: Okay. The Republicans don't remove him without question, so he's still president in 2020.

KRISTOL: Unless there's a real smoking gun.

BROWNSTEIN: Right. Unless there's an email from Putin or something. Right. So I think it doesn't change it that much.

KRISTOL: Yeah. I guess that might be the funny thing after all of the drama.

BROWNSTEIN: If Democrats vote to impeach him on a party-line basis, but based on basically iron-clad evidence from Mueller, I think that is seen, correctly, as essentially a symbolic event that voters ultimately have to render a verdict on in 2020. And that the portions of the country that are alarmed by Trump are reinforced. I would wonder about that. The thing I would wonder about most would be college white men.

KRISTOL: I think it's an intra – I think it probably has more effect among Republicans in the sense of, "Oh my god. It was bad. It wasn't just a witch hunt. And god knows what else there is." And, "Can we nominate the guy then after this?" is one thing. Even with Clinton, incidentally, that he was so popular while he was being impeached and afterwards. I don't know if it had been in his first term, would people have just said, "Fine. We're going to put him back on the ballot. It was Gore, not he."

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah. Would they have put him back on the ballot?

KRISTOL: It could be an intra-Republican issue more than the two parties, I suppose.

BROWNSTEIN: And again, I think the question for the intra-Republican is: Can you find any way to talk to Trump's working-class base? Because otherwise, it's – not just a futile gesture, in the sense that you could be making a very powerful point that shows the clear risks to the party of the direction they're headed, reinforcing the message of 2018 – but you can't win, obviously, or even really seriously threaten him, unless you can go beyond the white-collar parts of the party that were most hesitant about him to begin with.

KRISTOL: Final point. Third party? Independent candidates: the perpetual dream. The two party system is weaker than ever. Both parties are somehow both stronger than ever and weaker than ever. But maybe that's the problem, actually. It's both like stronger mobilization and weaker in attachment.

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah. You would have to say that eventually if you have Trump versus a very left Democrat, there will be a lot of voters that don't feel either reflects them, and that is real. In that sense, there is without question an opening. The problem is that because the choice is so stark, people who lean one way or the other, even a millimeter, are going to be very hesitant about voting for that third party and advantaging the other. If you are a slightly left-of-center woman outside of Des Moines. Are you going to vote for the Kasich/Hickenlooper ticket if you think it's going to make Trump president again?

KRISTOL: Well, the story of 2018: I had a lot of friends who were in that space. They had pretty attractive Independent candidates and they were hoping this would be the year when everyone would get sick of both parties. It was the opposite.

BROWNSTEIN: It was the opposite. Right.

KRISTOL: Kobach got the nomination in Kansas. Greg Orman, who had done well as an Independent in 2014 in the Senate race, is running for Governor. People I know who are friendly to Orman were like, "That's great. They've nominated the most unacceptable Republican they could have to modern Republicans. The Democrat was a kind of conventional liberal Democrat and this is a real opening up the middle. The opposite happened.

BROWNSTEIN: Because the stakes seem so high.

KRISTOL: The former moderate Republican governors and Senators from the state said, "Okay, we're endorsing a Democrat."

BROWNSTEIN: The stakes seem so high.

KRISTOL: This is the irony, right?

BROWNSTEIN: In the Trump era, the choice is so stark, so delineated that no one wants to take a chance of messing around with making any kind of gesture. I mean, I think I said this to you before, at Stalingrad, no one was checking people's loyalty to the party. That's the way it feels in American politics for many people at this point.

KRISTOL: So I suppose that might suggest – just to ridiculously think beyond 2020 – I mean, who knows? But you can imagine the crack-up comes after 2020 in one or either party. In a funny way, 2020 is the mobilization, but if, let's just say Trump loses to Biden or something, who's probably a one-term President, one could imagine, of course, a huge civil war in the Republican party then. "Was that all a horrible mistake or do we just need a better version of Trumpism?" And that war. Democrats, who knows? It would depend how they would govern, I suppose, and all that. But I guess the transformational moment, if there ever is to be one in the party system would be post-2020 it seems to me on this. Right?

BROWNSTEIN: Yes. But, I think that the result may be a little more baked than you do in that these kinds of changes in the party composition tend to be self-reinforcing. If in fact, Trump loses in 2020, or whether he wins, he is pushing out of the party more of the upper-middle class whites who are the most resistant to his kind of ethno-nationalism. So there's less to fight with.

I was going to say before, the last few Republican primaries have been 50/50 college/non-college. I'm not sure that's going to be the case this time. It might be majority non-college.

And then, conversely, yes, the reassurance candidate may be the right choice for Democrats in 2020, but the future of the Democratic party looks more like Beto and Kamala Harris than it does like Biden and Bloomberg. The inescapable metro, secular white-collar white, plus young minority, with working-class whites moving to the edge of the coalition, critical in some places, but not the driving force: that seems to be inexorable. I think the future nominees are going to look more like Beto and Kamala Harris than they are like Biden.

KRISTOL: But that could strain the Democratic coalition depending on what issues come up. It's not as if you all have the exact same interests and views.

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah. No, they don't. And taxes are the one. You see that in places like California. How much can you tax your culturally-aligned, white, upper-middle-class supporters in order to fund programs that mostly benefit your lower-income and non-white, younger supporters?

KRISTOL: And things like the military. Symbolically, you can say, as long as Trump's sending troops to the border for a ridiculous political reason, everyone can agree that's terrible. We like the troops and they don't deserve – But if you are actually talking about an actual foreign policy decision, the Hillary Clinton, let's call it, wing in the Democratic party looks pretty different, I suspect from the progressive, younger mobilizer. Or not? Or maybe the younger voters forget the old fights that made their parents more dove-ish, and become more hawkish again. Look at Putin, you know.

BROWNSTEIN: I finish where I start. I see a lot of topspin in the trends we're living through. And unless there is a really focused, almost heroic effort in the Republican party to expunge Trumpism – and it's hard to do because Trump, himself, did not come out of nowhere, he kind of intensified things that other Republicans had done – then I think it gets progressively harder to reassert a more racially neutral, inclusive, small government – a Jack Kemp, what Paul Ryan was five years ago – because the people who would support it kind of said, "I don't belong here anymore."

And then conversely, as I said of the Democratic party, this was a Rubicon election for Democrats. It was the first election ever where a majority of their House candidates were not white men. And that's the future. Look, they are the diverse coalition. It will not be too long before a majority of the presidential candidates votes come from minorities. Clinton was in the mid-40s. At some point, before too long, a majority of their votes will come from non-whites. Obviously, a majority of their votes come from women. That is going to have to be reflected in who they run.

And along those lines, just think about what happened in this election: Democrats got their highest share ever among college, white women, and meanwhile, nominated an unprecedented number of college, white women and kind of sent the signal, re-enforced the signal: this is where you belong.

I will end on this note, which is, [to] not elected officials who have to worry about voters, but the people who worry about electing Republicans: Can you look at these kind of trends and say, I want to play this hand for the next decade, ass opposed to the hand that Trump is effectively ceding to the other side.

KRISTOL: And their answer will be, “You know, I might agree with you privately, but here we are.” If you’re a Republican who’s kind of go-along, get-along, and have real candidates in the real world. You can’t be like Bill Kristol sitting on the outside imagining a different future. “This is the hand we got to play and we hope external events somehow change things.”

BROWNSTEIN: Trump seems to be more and more like one of those general managers in baseball who trades all the prospects to try to win the World Series next year. And when people say, “Well, what’s this going to mean for the team in five years?” “In five years, I’m going to be on the beach.”

KRISTOL: Right. But what have we won in 2016? That’s a very good analysis. As a baseball fan, I kind of like that analogy. The difference would be that, he did that, you all said he can’t win, he won or he almost won, let’s say he won the league championship and a couple of these old veterans are a little better than you expected. and you got lucky with one young guy or something. You know what I mean? So that people think, “Yeah, we can do another year or two of this.”

BROWNSTEIN: We can keep doing it.

KRISTOL: And you know, who knows what the future brings?

BROWNSTEIN: And the big issue there will be: Is there a way to undo the image that Trump has imprinted among younger generations? Or has he stamped the Republican party as a party of racial and cultural intolerance for essentially the millennial and the post-millennial generation. The “cohort theory” versus the “lifecycle theory” about whether people’s politics change as they age: somewhat, but the dominant impact was when they come of age politically. And if you’re talking about 70% of people 18-29 saying they disapprove of Trump. And 65% saying they think he’s a racist. And 70% saying he doesn’t respect women.

Okay, does that go away in 2022 or 2024 if he’s not there? Or are they essentially signaling that – as I said, so far everybody got the joke. Everybody who was the target of Trump’s veiled and not-so-veiled symbolism and imagery, recognize that he was essentially questioning whether they belonged here, and they came out to say pretty affirmatively, “I do belong here.”

And I think they will probably show up in even bigger numbers in 2020, although his side will as well. That’s why it’s just like Battle of the Bulge. That’s where we’re headed.

KRISTOL: Okay on that note, we’ll get together in a year maybe, just before the 2020 the actual primaries begin, we’ll discover all kinds of strange things have happened in 2019 and the whole deck has been shuffled. Or not. The big story of the preceding two years, really, is the deck didn’t get shuffled. Right?

BROWNSTEIN: It just moved further.

KRISTOL: It was more of the same, but 2018 looks like 2016 with a little more so.

BROWNSTEIN: A little more. With the college whites moving further away because you don't have Clinton. You didn't have the ballast of Clinton holding them back. And this may have been what white-collar, white America thought of Trump all the way through, and when you didn't have Clinton –

KRISTOL: And when you could cast the vote for the House member, which was going to check Trump, but you weren't quite voting *for* some other Democrat. So the question is: How much easier is it to be the Democratic candidate against Trump as opposed to the Democratic candidate for a House seat?

BROWNSTEIN: Harder. It's harder.

KRISTOL: Which you just are going to be one of many checking Trump. No one really worries in Northern Virginia that whoever the Democrat we elected was is going to pass whatever legislation she claimed to be for.

BROWNSTEIN: Harder in every respect except one, which is that, the one exception is that it's very difficult for a House candidate to turn out young people. That would be the one exception: that the young people where Trump is really cratering and the Republican Party is really – As I said way back when, they lost 18-29 [year-olds] in every state with an exit poll. Everyone. Except for Indiana where they tied. That includes North Dakota, and Missouri, and Texas and Arizona. And they lost them by big margins almost everywhere. And I guarantee you in 2020 they will be a higher share of the electorate than they were in 2018.

KRISTOL: Well, with that guarantee, it's good to be left with some guarantee as to what's to come. This was terrific, Ron. Thank you very much.

BROWNSTEIN: Thank you. Thanks for having me.

KRISTOL: Thanks for being here.

And thank you for joining us on Conversations.

[END]