

Conversations with Bill Kristol

Guest: James Carville

Taped April 6, 2021

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I. Biden and the Parties (0:15 – 38:20)

KRISTOL: Hi, welcome back to CONVERSATIONS. I'm Bill Kristol. I'm very pleased to be joined today by James Carville, who I've known for quite a while, who I first met I think in 1991, '92, when he clobbered us, helping to run, really running the Bill Clinton campaign. I was there in the George H.W. Bush White House and re-election effort.

But we've debated many times. We've been on the same side more recently. But most importantly for this purpose I think, James is one of the most astute analysts, not just practitioners, not just partisans, but analysts of American politics. I really want to get his thoughts as we speak — in, what, early April of 2021 — on where we stand, the Biden administration, the Democratic party, what are the prospects for the short term, and also medium term for the Democratic party, but also democracy in America, and so forth. James, thanks for being with me.

CARVILLE: Good. Good. Fun to be here.

KRISTOL: Where are we? You were very strongly engaged in the fight against Donald Trump. But then a little disappointed maybe by, I mean, happy that Biden won, worried about the closeness of the election and the down-ballot stuff? Where does the Democratic party stand? You've been involved in it for a long time.

CARVILLE: Well, first thing, we won the presidency in 2020, in November, 2020. "But other than that, Mrs. Lincoln, how was the play?" Well, it really, wasn't very good after the fact that we won. How do you win the presidency and say, "Well, we had a kind of disappointing year"? But it actually, that's really what happened. Trump came within, what?, 42,000 votes in four states? Could've been portioned differently in four states. I was pretty gloomy.

Then January the fifth came, and lo and behold, Democrats pick up two seats in Georgia, which completely, “the two seats heard around the world” or something. The most significant, probably, off-year election — off-year election, was not a different date. And so you had that.

And then you had January the sixth, the insurrection. I believe to this day, and will probably believe to my dying day, that the most significant 24 hours in American politics was 8:00 PM Eastern, January 5th to 8:00 PM Eastern, January 6th. It changed the way that we looked at politics, It changed the way politics were covered. It changed just a lot of things in a country that politically doesn’t change a lot.

KRISTOL: Explain that. I mean, so January 5th, well, let’s just do each of them. January 5th, obviously, we would be looking at a pretty different situation now if Mitch McConnell controlled the Senate, right?

CARVILLE: Correct. When you win the presidency — we went through this with Clinton and [inaudible] we had the same thing. We lost the runoff. What January 5th, I mean the difference between the “nearly right word” and the “right word” is the difference between lightening and a lightening bug. The difference between 49 seats, 50 seats is the difference between lightening and a lightening bug. It’s a really big two seats.

But it’s still very narrow. And a Democratic coalition is always very, very fragile. And so you have to say, well, it was a good January the fifth. And really January the sixth set them back, and will continue to set them back because the trials and everything else. But we’re trying to hold this thing together with not very much — A little glue here and maybe a nail there, but I don’t know how long it’s going to last.

KRISTOL: I thought you were cheered up here now, and now you’re getting all — Democrats everywhere are watching this. They’re thinking, “Oh my God, is it that fragile?” But it is. It strikes me that it is fragile. So talk a little bit about that.

CARVILLE: I think that Democrats that listen to this show will know that I generally tell them what time it is. Sometimes I’ll be more optimistic about it, but I don’t think any Democrat can sit here and look at this and say, “Wow, chick-i-da-dee, we’re on our way to some —” No, really. Now we could. I mean, we could. But there’s a lot left to go. And what’s really helped is that the most damning critique of the largest government infusion of money since maybe the New Deal has been by Larry Summers, who is anything but a Republican. But I mean they haven’t really had much to say. “Cancel culture,” “Biden is senile,” and “the border is falling apart.” That’s about it. It’s something I called “CBS”: cancel, border, senility. And meanwhile they’re forging ahead here.

KRISTOL: Well, what about that? I mean, it does seem like given that you have a fairly brain-dead Republican party for now, kind of reeling from the last few years, and the craziness of January sixth, and the failure to repudiate January sixth, I don’t know. It seemed like Republicans do seem weak, but why aren’t Democrats more able to take advantage of it? I guess I’ll put it that way. Or are they taking advantage of it? And we’ll just see that in a year or two, that they did a pretty good job of taking advantage of it?

CARVILLE: I think when you say Republicans, you got to think 65% of them, 75%, I'll give a number, are Trump, right? And there's another certain percent that are Republicans. And we found in a lot of research — and this is an opportunity as a Democrat — that the Trump wing feels demoralized. They feel let down in that they actually think the election was stolen from them. And some of them are even mad at Trump, but this has been terribly demoralizing to them. Of course they can't stand Democrats. They're not going to be kind of available. But the Republicans have very difficult needle to thread here — what you saw with Lindsay Graham and everybody else going through these pretzel-like contortions to try to split the difference. That's not going to go anywhere.

But I think if I were an anti-Trump Republican, I'd say the last few months have been pretty good for you. Trump is not near as big a presence as some of us would have feared. And he's still huge, but he's not drawing that big of TV ratings. He's been pretty much taken off of social media. He can get the hard core to go down and perform for him at Mar-a-Lago. But I think he is much less a force in this early to mid-April than I would have thought. And I don't think there's much, when you look at these polls, and 57% of the Republicans want him to run again, that's not a very good number. That's not a very good number.

KRISTOL: You think so? Well, let's talk about the Republicans for a minute. I still want to get back to the Democrats, but I guess I have the slightly opposite inclination, which is, I don't know, every time some candidate has 57% at this stage, early as it is, who is well-known and has held high office before, he or she seems to win the nomination, whether it's Biden, or Hillary Clinton, or Romney and McCain who had lost the two previous times. And there's such a tendency to — and he still dominates half the party. And so isn't he still the most likely nominee in 2024? And isn't his endorsement still going to be a huge plus for people in 2022? And doesn't that mean we still have a Trumpy Republican party?

CARVILLE: Okay. Let's say, all right, 57, you say that's not a good number. The number was 89, three months ago.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

CARVILLE: That was not going in the right direction. And then, of that 57, it's something, but I mean, to have a hammer lock on it like he had before, I don't think that's going to happen. Plus he's getting older and he doesn't have the same access. And we got to see where the Republicans are, but they might be where the Democrats were in 2020: "Shit, let's just win. Like, okay, this is okay. So the guy is old. Okay. Who cares? We got to win. Doesn't matter about the age. [Inaudible] Nope, got to be for Biden. He's the one that has the best chance for winning." Had it turned out that we would have nominated someone else, Trump would probably still be president.

KRISTOL: Do you agree with that? I've discussed that with other people, Biden, probably the only Democrat who beats Trump, the way things turned out in 2020?

CARVILLE: Could be. I mean, this defund the police was just a terrible drag on the Democratic party. It really was. Don't kid yourself. And then they brought

Biden, but easy to get sucked into that. And that had a lot to do with why we didn't do as well as we wanted to.

But of course he's still a big presence. I just think right now he's less of a presence than I would have thought in November. And I don't see it getting, it will be harder for it to go up than it is to go down. It's going to be very hard. And he just doesn't have the same —He just looks different. Everybody does. When you're president you look a certain way, when you're not president anymore you're beaten.

KRISTOL: Right.

CARVILLE: And I think he knows it.

KRISTOL: Yeah. That's interesting. I mean that, and look, I mean you've always been good at this having been in real politics, it's the change that matters as much as the static photo of the numbers, so to speak. Right? And if it's going from, as you say, 89 to 57, it can go to 47 or 37. And we're a long, long way away from 2022, let alone 2024. So maybe the Republican party has more dynamism in it or is less stuck where it is than people think.

CARVILLE: I don't know. But I do know, let's just say when late 2023, and they come out with a poll and Nikki Haley against Biden is down one, and Trump against Biden is down 11. That's going to make an impact. It sure made an impact in the Democrats in 2020. And I never believed, "That's insider baseball, people don't care about polls, talk about the five years education, environment, and ethics or whatever, and that shit. Okay?" They do pay attention to polls now. I mean, they really do. And they like you better than him, but if they think him can beat them, they're going to vote for him in large numbers. And this is a real change in American politics, real change.

KRISTOL: Interesting. Why is that, do you think?

CARVILLE: Well, I guess because of hyper-partisanship, people pay more and more attention, the hyper-partisans do, and there is just nothing that motivates people in politics like winning an election. And there's nothing that traumatizes people in politics more than losing an election. It sounds kind of obvious. And why you need me to tell you that, but that's what it is. And some of it is going to depend on 2022, which is unknown, but I'm not — I think I would describe my views as, Trump is lesser, certainly still the major influence in the Republican party, but I would say less than most other people think.

KRISTOL: So that's encouraging for me personally. And I think from my point of view for the country, but of course, if you're a Democrat, that worries you in a way, because as you just suggested, Trump might be easier to beat than a less Trumpy, Nikki Haley type candidacy that's good enough for the Trump supporters, but good enough for the establishment and business types and all that. And so it kind of gets back to the Democrats, right? Why is the coalition so fragile? What can they do better? What are their greatest challenges? I mean, if Biden called you and said, what two or three things could I do to really politically strengthen us going forward, what's the answer on that?

CARVILLE:

Let's talk about the Democrats for a little bit. First of all, if Nikki Haley was good enough to keep the Trump people and bring all the business people back to the party, we would get our asses kicked. But they once asked Rodin, "How do you sculpt an elephant?" He said, "Well, it's easy. You take a piece of marble and a chisel, and you take away everything that's not elephant." Right? What's hard about that? Just getting all the Trump people, and then all of the establishment Republicans to sit down and say, look, we can all be friends again. But that's tough. The Democrats, we are traditionally a coalition party. Like what form of government is it? We'll go to and take a little bit from that and a little bit from here and we'll get the Arab gambling party, and then we'll take the anti-settler party, and then we'll kind of cobble this together for the sake of winning. So you end up with AOC and Joe Manchin.

Now, nowadays the quote "progressives," I don't know what nomenclature to use anymore, but the leftists — a term I like better, I think it's more accurate — they're starting to primary these people. And by the way, we've got a no-vote margin in the Senate when you've got to have the vice-president vote; we're down to four votes in the House. It's not like we have this giant juggernaut that's just rolling through the political landscape of America. We're in very fragile condition.

And we have a very fragile coalition. And within the coalition, the probably two biggest contributors to that coalition, are obviously African Americans and educated, white women, probably the two biggest blocks that we have in the party. And their interest has converged in certain places, probably diverged and other places, but of course, but everything else becomes necessary because you're getting a small but necessary part of say, the white working class vote, the kind of pro-union vote. And you've got, Hispanics are definitely not monolithic, and you're starting to do not very well there. So you got a lot to do.

Now specifically, there are certainly things that unite the Democratic party, like the minimum wage. Suburban educated women have nothing wrong with a \$15 minimum wage. You talk about expanding healthcare, that's fine. I mean, I think some of this infrastructure spending, this environmental spending, but I think the college part of the coalition cares more about that. And the other things we've found out, and this kind of helps the Democrats, at least among older African-Americans, they're pretty moderate. They don't go for the shiny new thing. I mean, Warren could never connect with him. I mean, Biden, it's just very few people that they know, that they feel like they can relate to. And Biden just had that quality. And again, that's a critical part in the Democratic primaries. This is the most important constituency in the party.

So we may pick up some more — You know what happened in 2020, this analysis by this guy, David Shaw, some kind of God damn genius. And it pointed out that educational differences got even more profound, with the more college-educated whites being Democrat, and less being Republican. But non-white got a little more Republican. And they tend to have a more, pro-police, anti-identity politics, for lack of a better word. So we got to keep struggling here. And we got to keep struggling to keep what share we got left of these rural, working-class whites because they're so strategically located, you just can't win without a certain percentage of them.

KRISTOL: You mentioned defund the police, you mentioned identity politics, cancel culture, whatever you want to call these things, but how worried are you about that complex of issues? Some the attacks may be unfair, some may be fair, but the Democrats, parts of the Democratic party coalition, giving enough oxygen to that stuff that allows Republicans to just scream and yell about it for two years or four years and really have an effect. You think it did have an effect 2020, certainly down ballot, right? The police stuff?

CARVILLE: It did. It did. It is the thing that I'm most worried about. And because, first of all, who they are. I don't know of anybody, and I talked to, I live in New Orleans, okay? It's no secret. I don't know of a single person that thinks of themselves as a "person of color." I really don't. I had Ruben Gallego, who's a Democratic congressman from Arizona, and we did much better in Arizona than we did in Texas or Florida, and he said, "I've never heard anybody use the word LatinX." And that's just not the way people talk. It's not what they — It's just not the way. When people hear that — And it's a little different because when you're in the middle of it, you hear it so much it doesn't stand out. When you're out in the rest of the country — It was like the janitor at Smith College. That story. I give Tom the credit for running the story, but there is a feeling — And I got to tell you, I'm a supportive, ardent Democrat, passion and everything, but the English faculty at Amherst has too much power in this party. They really do. And they come up with all of these different things and when people see that, they don't like it because it's not what their life is. I think Biden does a — Congratulations, he stays out of that.

Look at Florida. So we're assessing something. Here's a state that in 2018, 64% of people that lived in the state specifically gave felons the right to vote. And in 2020, 60% —

KRISTOL: That was on the ballot in 2018.

CARVILLE: On the ballot.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

CARVILLE: Voting. People voted that way. On the ballot in 2020 was a \$15 minimum wage, which everybody in Washington says is unachievable. It passed with 60%. Maybe there's nothing wrong with the people of Florida. Maybe there's something wrong with the campaigns we've been running. Because if you're in an environment where almost two-thirds of the people want to give felons the right to vote, and where three-fifths of the people want what most would consider the most extreme position of a constant democratic position, well, that's a race we can win in. There's nothing underlying that I see here that tells me that we can't get 50.1% in Florida but we don't.

Nelson Diaz, who Paul talked to, was the chairman of the Republican party, said, "We never mentioned in Miami Dade," he told Paul, "we never mentioned Joe Biden." It was all Kamala Harris, the most liberal US senator. And socialism, because all these people come from Venezuela, Cuba. And it was very effective. They left Biden totally out of the equation. Obviously, that's going to probably change a little bit but Biden doesn't get involved in all of this and I think that's smart. He just keeps talking about what he talks about and I think it's smart because once you get

drawn into it, they're like, they never stop. Never stop. They never stop. They're always trying to get somebody fired. They're outraged at somebody all the time. And it just wears people down. It's not worth fooling with them. They're nuts.

KRISTOL: Obviously, I think I would agree with you that if I were advising Biden, I'd tell him don't get involved. But don't some people in the party have to push back on it or else it just continues to erode support, as you've been saying.

CARVILLE: There's a race in Louisiana. It's April 25th. It's a runoff. And it's actually going to say something. It's a 60/30 percent Black district. A southern original district. And there's a woman by the name of Karen Carter-Peterson, whose dad I knew was Ken Carter, is chairman of the Louisiana Democratic party, was in the state senate. But she's running and she's running as the Emily's List, as the more woke candidate, et cetera, et cetera. And she's running against a guy named Troy Carter, who's on the New Orleans city council, he's in the state house, he's in the state senate. Kind of what you think he is. A good guy, nice guy. I talked to him for a long time. And he's running as the bread and butter. And that's going to tell you something. That race will be — It's a Democratic district, it's mostly Black, it's in the South. That's going to say a lot because they don't have a lot of different issue positions. But I know she's got Stacy Abrams and Donna Brazile and Emily's List and all what you would expect.

And Troy's got the mayor of Baton Rouge and the sheriff of this, kind of thing. But it's going to be interesting to watch that race.

KRISTOL: And they're both Black. Both candidates are African American, right?

CARVILLE: Both Black.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

CARVILLE: Correct.

KRISTOL: So, that's interesting.

CARVILLE: Yeah. The difference is it's definitely a more woke, more national woke profile against a more Jim Clyburn working in the trenches kind of profile.

KRISTOL: It strikes me from the outside that there are a lot of impressive younger Democrats in Congress, for example. A lot of the class of 2018 in the House. But somehow they don't — I don't know — Obviously, the media loves AOC and all that, so they get all the attention, and the universities get all the attention, and the Amherst English department, as you say. I don't even know if you can call it the English department anymore but whatever it is.

CARVILLE: Yeah.

KRISTOL: World Literature department or something. But is there something that could be done to help the Spanbergers and Lurias and —

CARVILLE: [inaudible 00:24:26] Connor Lamb. This Katie Hill, she's good. They came up. That 2018 class was just stunning. I mean, right. And Mickey Sherrill.

KRISTOL: Right.

CARVILLE: But what happens is the speaker's 80-something, the party is 80-something and there's just a lot of — The committee, chairs, there's a lot of baggage there, and they're going to have to — and I think they know this and they're pushing for it — they're going to have to do something to let this young talent shift up because they'll start losing races.

Let me talk about AOC a second because this is great both-side risk. "All right, James. Of course we've got Marjorie Taylor Greene, admitted. You got AOC." Well, stop. I think AOC is very savvy media-wise, is a little naïve about politics and what she can obtain. She wants everybody to have health insurance and this kind of thing. She's, to me, kind of naïve and doesn't speak very well for a lot of the country. Marjorie Taylor Greene is just completely nuts.

KRISTOL: Right?

CARVILLE: She's just completely — The Rothschilds and laser beams and Q-Anon. It's not the same thing. I'm sorry. One might be a little excessive and a little media savvy and too liberal and doesn't understand. The other one is just stone-ass crazy. By the way, she doesn't stand alone. This guy from Arizona — You could name five of them off the top of your head that are just equally as crazy. And the one that had the talent over there was Liz Cheney because she's the one that did the recruiting. Liz saw what the Democrats did in 2018 and they went out and recruited all of these — They recruited a lot of female candidates. Conservative but they did a good job in recruiting and they kicked our ass. But of course, now they're trying — They take the most confident person they got and exorcize her out the party.

I think I told you. I told somebody. It's like, "We didn't have to shoot Yamamoto down, they're shooting him down themselves. They're taking their best person out."

KRISTOL: Right. Right. But it is striking to me how little price they paid for January sixth. Kevin McCarthy votes to overturn the results in two states that were conducted totally legit by Republican governors and secretaries of state and — or in the case of Georgia, at least, Republicans. And I guess Arizona — I think they voted on that, too. I don't know. Somehow it just seems like we're just chugging along and Republican donors are giving money to the NRCC and it's not a problem. I'm a little spooked by the lack of price they're paying for tolerating not just Majorie Taylor Green but all the people who haven't really been willing to draw any lines on the right.

And also, I agree totally — If you talk to republican donors, it's all like, "AOC is as dangerous as Trump." Joe Biden's president. "Well, that doesn't matter. The party's going to be the AOC party in two years or four years." You hear that all the time from a certain kind of establishment Republican.

CARVILLE: First of all, the Democratic party had a chance to make a statement about themselves in the primaries of 2020. It decided very definitively.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

CARVILLE: It had its leftists and it had its liberal whatever you want to call it. And it wasn't close. It just was not close. It was like a two to one thing. And it was a pretty clear delineation. And it wasn't like Bernie Sanders had more money. He was in every debate, he was everywhere. He had every opportunity that he had and it was clear that's not what the Democrats want do at that time, it's not what they wanted to do.

You're right. AOC, the donors, they hate her. She likes it. She raises money off of it. It's kind of back and forth. But she is nowhere near — In her wing, that wing of the Democratic party is much smaller than the nutty wing of the Republican party. Don't kid yourself. As a percent of their caucus, it's way higher than ours. And I don't think she's crazy. I just think she's kind of naïve and doesn't understand politics beyond the [inaudible] and fundraising, but there's nothing inherently wrong with AOC. She's actually, if anything, kind of talented. You got to admire her sometimes and some of the stuff that she pulls off. And I think she's much more talented than the other three in the Squad.

KRISTOL: Yeah. It's funny that she's become — Well, not funny, she's become of the face of it because she is the most talented, I suppose.

CARVILLE: Yeah.

KRISTOL: But she is a little caricatured in a way.

Could the Biden administration — they've got so much to do, but could they strengthen the younger, let's call it Biden-wing, of the Democratic party? Or is Biden just a one-off, 78 year-old guy who, as you say, beat back, with Clyburn's help, beat back the left. But is there a legacy there? Could there be? How would you do that?

CARVILLE: You know, I'm not part of the world. I'm not in it. But you hear a lot that they like — One of the things is they could take younger people and staff more of them in the federal government. Right now they got — people worked for Clinton work for Biden. From Obama they're all coming back. It's a lot of the same thing. But they could — and from everything, it's probably true because I've heard it from too many people, their hiring process is cumbersome and not particularly speedy. Somebody needs to start figuring out where some young talented people are and just give them the baton and let's sit down and start re-doing some of these committees in the House and the Senate and give some of this real young talent a chance to flourish. I think they'll do that.

Yeah. In parties, voters skew young, our leaders skew old.

KRISTOL: Yeah. Yeah. It's funny, isn't it? It's kind of crazy here. It's a youthful party with a 78 year-old president, 80 year-old speaker and however old Schumer is, in his 70s.

CARVILLE: If you remember the 80s, Reagan was the most popular politician with young people.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's true. Yeah. But he very much tried to articulate a forward looking, optimistic doctrine. I guess Biden is trying to do the same thing, you could argue.

CARVILLE: Yeah, he's trying to do the same thing. And what Biden does really well, he doesn't get involved in extraneous debate. It's vaccinations, it's infrastructure, it's COVID relief legislation. Everything that he does, he stays in his lane. And the lane that he is in is a good lane. He's fine. Just stay right there. Don't get too much in the culture wars because they're going to suck you in. And probably, at the end of the day what happens is that we start out thinking we're going to win but we pay a bigger price every time — Even when you win, you pay a price in the culture wars where people just get more and more resentful.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's what strikes me the most is he's had a good first 70 — I think we're speaking on — He's been in office almost exactly 75 days. If you had said to us on January 1st the vaccine situation would be what it is, which is pretty good, the economic numbers would be good, the stock market, which presumably particularly the upper middle class types care about has been excellent. He's got a big government proposal for infrastructure and all. Some of it's too much probably and all that, but still it's not crazy and it'll get whittled down in Congress. And he's not imposing socialism on the economy. He's not trying to tell you that you can't go to see your doctor. He's not defunding the police.

In some ways, I feel like he should be doing better than he is and the Democratic party's prospects should be better than they are. I'm really startled by how much the culture stuff seems to be a drag on them because objectively you'd have to say, "Whoa, this is a pretty strong first 75 days," I think.

CARVILLE: First of all, I think what a quant would say is, "Bill, he's 58% approval."

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's fair enough.

CARVILLE: That's astronomical in this environment. We never saw anybody above 51 since 9/11.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

CARVILLE: Post-9/11.

KRISTOL: I guess that's a good point. The environment really is different from what you and I were in in the 80s and 90s.

CARVILLE: Yeah. We grew up and somebody would have approval of 74. You know what I mean?

KRISTOL: Right.

CARVILLE: That doesn't exist. I'd say that's the first thing. I've seen a couple polls. The most important number to look for when these polls start coming in is self-identified party ID because that will tell you everything. This is worth a political consultant, one-on-one, for just two minutes.

KRISTOL: No, please. This is important, actually. Yeah.

CARVILLE: All right. So, in the poll, and the better ones will all have a version of this. "Do you consider yourself a Republican, Democrat," And if you add Independent, you're going to get a different number. But I liked it the way we do it, "Do you consider yourself Republican, Democrat? Strong, weak?" Then if they say neither, Independent, "which way do you lean?" That's very complicated. If that number is higher than plus six, if it comes in about plus six, plus five Democratic, that's normal. If it goes beyond that and it stays beyond that, then that's an indication of trouble. Because people say, "Well, Trump still gets 85% of Republicans." Well, 85% of 40 is a different number than 85% of 35. Everybody focuses on that 85, and not the self-identified party ID. The last two I saw had 10 point Democratic advantages.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I saw plus 11 or 12, I think was the last one I saw.

CARVILLE: Whenever you see a poll, just flag that part of it. I just had somebody in the office say, when something comes across, just send me what the self-described party ID was. And that'll probably give you as much of an example because the thing that they have to worry about, them being the Republicans, is demoralization. "I don't have Trump. The Democrats are just crooked. They stole everything from us. There's nothing we can do. We're doomed, and we don't have Trump back and we got this person." They've got a real problem to get these people back out to vote, a real problem. It's going to be a real problem when you get a \$1,600 check. So remember that. What you want to do is — Everybody says this, "They don't pay a price, James. God damn it, they do stuff that you couldn't believe and they get away with it." Let's see, they lost the House, they lost the Senate, they lost the presidency. But we thought they should have lost it two to one. They didn't, but they got a lot of problems. Trust me. I scream and think about, "Well, we got to hold the coalition together. How can we get AOC and Joe Manchin on the same page here." Because they got real, real issues.

KRISTOL: That's a good point. I want to come back in a way to what advice you give younger people just to, what to look for in polls and what to think about in politics, as opposed to all the other extraneous stuff.

But, I mean, Biden won the vote, the real vote, right? On November 3rd, the Democrats in the House won the real vote by 4 or 5%, let's just say. Now if self-described Democrats are around plus 10, that suggests that five months later Democrats have vaguely picked up 5%. Right? Which is not nothing. I mean, in fact, in a hyper partisan environment, it's kind of a lot,

CARVILLE: Yeah. What I'd say to young people too, when you see a poll number, pay attention to what the last number was. So if you say the country —

KRISTOL: Direction, yeah.

CARVILLE: Direction of the country is 45% right, 35% wrong. I said, well, I don't know. That's not great, but where was it two months ago? Well, it was 35%, right and 45% wrong. Well then that's okay. That's moving in the right direction. It's sort of simple. It's so obvious you sound stupid saying it, but the better polls do these time series is, and those are always good

to look at because you'll see if anything's changing. In this world, very little has changed in American politics and American public opinion, but maybe somewhat it's starting to change now. Don't know. I would put it on the watch list.

II. Looking Back and Forward (38:20 – 1:04:08)

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's interesting. That's good. Yeah. That's interesting. I mean, generally, you were famous in '92 for the three bullet points in the War Room and all that. I mean, you've been good at always focusing, I think, on the stuff that matters and keeping the extraneous stuff out. What would you say, leaving aside polling, you've discussed that, more broadly, I mean, what would you — people aren't paying huge attention. People have jobs, they're busy. They're trying to follow things though, what would you tell a bright young person, what to look for a year or two or three from now? What are the big ticket items that matter as opposed to all the chatter and talk and this and that?

CARVILLE: Oh, for a young person, they just, by and large, they don't like Trump. Okay. I'm being overly general, of course some do, but his numbers are just terrible with them. I would certainly talk about, pick out some things that are going on that you really like and put those front and center. One of my big passions is, when it comes to climate, is mitigation. That's great, you can do all you want, but in the meantime we need higher levies. We need better drainage systems. We need to raise — like doing what they did in Miami Beach and just literally raised the whole thing. That creates jobs. It does everything. If I were young and was going to be in the party — some people's motivation is going to be social justice warriors. Some peoples is going to be better education. Yeah. I don't know, but I think that it'd be exciting time to be a young Democrat because the direction of the party is not a settled thing.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

CARVILLE: So you would be in on the deal as to what you wanted to accentuate and [inaudible]. We are, remember, a party of coalitions more than we are a party of a governing philosophy or something. And I'd also say the future of the Republican coalition is not good. This is what these companies, what's going on with Delta and Coke.

KRISTOL: Yeah. Let's talk about that a little since you were so involved, and I chimed in a little bit also on the Georgia stuff months ago. Right?

CARVILLE: Right. So if you are marketing, so let's just say we have a marketing firm here. And so, okay, we've got to figure out who we want to buy our product. You know, beverages. Well, we've got, on one side, we've got a lot of white people over 65 and they're pretty fanatical, and on the other side, we got like educated people, young people. Okay, why do you want, who do you want to sell your product to?

In addition to that, these companies have to be very conscious of their workforce, because just not everybody can write code, get over it. Not everybody can do high end finance work. If they get a bad reputation or something like that, they can't recruit. It is just a limited number of people. So the companies are, in a way, looking out for their own interests and their own interest is not to get down wind of the Democratic coalition.

We've got to understand that, it seems weird, but the Democratic coalition has real economic power. It really does because it's who everybody wants.

KRISTOL: Yeah. I'm struck. I mean, the right, the Trumpy Republicans right now are enjoying attacking huge American corporations, which, I'm not against some populous attacks or legitimate attacks on corporate behavior and corporate governance and, they should maybe be taxed more and so forth, but it seems like a weird political strategy to take on baseball, Coke. I mean, does most of the country spend their time thinking that Major League Baseball and Coca-Cola are terrible entities? I don't know. So I agree on that, that seems like a crazy Republican strategy.

CARVILLE: I agree. I think, at some point — Right now, again, they don't have anything that they're rallying around. Anything that they can get to unify them, they'll take it. It's just that these companies know that they want access to the Democratic coalition. They don't like getting caught in this, trust me, it's the last place they want to be. CEO of Coke lives in the U.K., imagine how much went into this decision. I'd love one these TikToks, how did Delta decide to do this? How did Coke decide? Because they don't make these kinds of things lightly.

KRISTOL: Yeah. But nonetheless, they passed legislation in Georgia, on voting rights that's much less severe, I guess you'd say, than what was originally planned. But still, they did pass it and they signed it into law. I mean, so which way does that cut then? The fierceness of the Republican determination to make voting more difficult and stuff is pretty astonishing to me.

CARVILLE: Well, not really because they know what happened. I mean, if you're a Georgia Republican for the last 20 years, January the fifth was a shock to your system.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

CARVILLE: So what they say is one day they just got up, six o'clock in the morning and said, "Hey, we're going to write a 98 page bill that expands voting rights." Okay, sure. "We're going to pass it in the House at nine o'clock in the morning, we're going to pass it in the Senate at noon, and then the Governor and six other white guys are going to sit under a painting of a plantation, and we're going to sign it and not let anybody else in the room." Then say, "How dare you criticize us when we were just trying to help?"

KRISTOL: Yeah.

CARVILLE: "If people just had the good sense to let the, if these Blacks in Georgia had the good sense to let the Georgia Republican decide what's best for them. They would be a lot better off than deciding themselves by voting, because we know that the Georgia Republican party is — the modern Georgia Republican party is always looking for the best interests of the poor and the downtrodden and the marginalized people." Their argument is just, when you get to it, it's, "Yeah. It could have been worse and we left Sunday voting in." I assumed that they'll, at some point, they will try to back off and say, "Well, you can bring people water in lines." Coke will say, "Well, we'll supply the water." I'm sure everybody wants to get off of

this. It should've never gotten to this. Somebody should have gone to him early.

KRISTOL: How worried are you practically though that there'll be enough ability to tinker with voting over the next year, that it will be harder for, just practically harder for Democrats to win races in swing districts and swing states.

CARVILLE: I worry a great deal. Even though the law passed, I worry a little bit less about Georgia because they're so organized. They're going to be so well financed.

KRISTOL: The Democrats, yeah.

CARVILLE: Particularly in Georgia. But sure you worry. Sure, you worry about it. If we'd go back to Florida and the 64%, it's actually a winning political issue.

KRISTOL: That's interesting.

CARVILLE: It's actually good to talk about.

KRISTOL: That's interesting. So you don't think it sounds just like complaining or inside baseball? It's an actual, real issue?

CARVILLE: Everything that I look at tells me people like to expand voting rights.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

CARVILLE: It's clear that the Republicans have made a choice. Our coalition is shrinking. It's not growing. We just have no chance of appealing to people outside of our coalition. So we've got to limit it. So they've just basically given up on macro messaging.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

CARVILLE: Can't do it.

KRISTOL: I mean, one thing I think you've always stressed when you and I have done speeches together, we both stressed, is how unpredictable, contingent, fluid, politics is. The conventional wisdom is often wrong. Once a consensus gels, things often break in the opposite direction. Democrats "can't win the White House," so that was 1992. "Electoral College lock," five of the last six elections. Then the opposite, 2016, the loss of "the blue wall." Whoops, it's not it's so much of a wall. I mean, A) I'm just curious, do you think there's any particular thing that conventional wisdom is wrong about today? And B) looking backward, you've had such an interesting career, what were the biggest surprises? What are the biggest lessons of things that happened that people didn't expect? You were in that '91 race that was so important in Pennsylvania, that was the precursor really to Clinton in '92, which people thought Bush and the Republicans were strong. I'm just curious, I think people are too fatalistic and they assume that social science can predict all these things, which I'm pretty doubtful about.

CARVILLE: Yeah. I mean, look, there's no doubt that polling's had a terrible, didn't have very good last two — I love polling. I like pollsters as people and many of them are friends of mine and they're all trying to figure out what went wrong too. There's always some [inaudible] watching expertise.

KRISTOL: Right.

CARVILLE: It's just kind of fun to watch. One of the things that people of a certain thing is — They think the economy is was one issue, healthcare is another issue. If you remember the War Room, "It's the economy, stupid. don't forget healthcare." To 80% of the people in this country, and I'm just making that up, I'm probably low, their electrocardiogram and their 401k is the same. To wealthy people, they're two different things. If you go to the doctors, okay, this is where you are physically. This is your financial health. For 80% of people in the country now, their financial health is their health.

KRISTOL: Wow.

CARVILLE: They get one bad diagnosis, they're done. All right. Really, the distinction, the line, between healthcare and the economy to most people, is a very, very thin line. Don't poor people go to the doctor when something goes wrong? Or they go to the dentist when something goes wrong? [Inaudible] the consequence of that.

It's the middle-class people too. I mean, you can't do, every focus group you do in Ohio, Wisconsin, people say, "I'm one disease away from bankruptcy." I mean, that's so common, no one even comments on it anymore.

KRISTOL: Or extended care for older relatives and so forth, the degree to which that is the dominant financial concern.

CARVILLE: If you didn't have that, and that's part of their Medicaid, that long-term care, it'd be terrible. But the Democrats don't win on that because people know that the Republicans are not going to get rid of it. They're just not.

KRISTOL: Though you think you could still — They did win in 2018, I think, by making, don't you think, by highlighting that the Republicans would have sort of tried to get rid of it, I guess.

CARVILLE: I'll tell you what happened, this is a very simple little story. In 2016, people said, well, we got away from ourselves. We'll go out and we'll recruit. We'll just talk about — They didn't talk about Trump much in 2018. It was kitchen table issues, whatever you want to call them, but it was pretty focused on expanded healthcare, that kind of thing, and really good candidates, as we talked about early in the program, really good.

In 2020, kind of went to sleep, fell back on recruiting, that didn't get the best out of us. Then let the whole defund the police thing get out of hand. The Democratic debates, some of them were not very good for people to be watching, it looked like it was just a really leftie party that is really into identity more than my life.

It came out fine and Biden did fine, and nobody else other than Biden did all that great. I think there's a real lesson underneath this. To the extent that, there were very few people that voted for Trump and voted for a congressional Democrat, but there are a lot of people that voted for Biden that voted for a congressional Republican.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I know, that's something I'm struck here in Washington that the Democrats haven't quite — They were so happy to win Georgia, which I understand on January 5th, that that sort of blocked out the actual facts of November 3rd, which were minus, what was it? 12 or 13 House seats, minus two legislative chambers.

CARVILLE: And going in, thinking we were going to do pretty good.

KRISTOL: Yeah. Yeah, with all the polling and stuff.

CARVILLE: Remember, 18% of the country elects 52 senators.

KRISTOL: Yeah. Yeah, well, that's not [crosstalk 00:53:33]

CARVILLE: It's just not going to change.

KRISTOL: That's not going to change.

CARVILLE: [crosstalk 00:53:34]

KRISTOL: That part's not going to change. Maybe gerrymandering in the House will change a little bit.

CARVILLE: A little bit, or you can add DC, and bring it up to —

KRISTOL: Yeah. That would be interesting. I'll let you go soon, but thank you for joining us. I'm just curious, looking backwards, any particular, if you had some young person who didn't know your career and didn't know American history that well from 1985 to 2015, what would you say? What are the big lessons of '91-'92? Or just generally, being a Southern liberal all those years, that's an interesting thing. Were you ever tempted to — you were not tempted to switch parties, I assume, unlike Zell Miller for whom you worked, or Phil Graham, against whom you worked and so forth?

CARVILLE: No, I never was. It's funny that not very many of us, but there's a real bond of being a white, Southern, '70s liberal. I mean, people —

KRISTOL: What's the key to that? I really am curious about that.

CARVILLE: Oh, everything's race. My whole view of politics, when I was in the '50s, growing up in south Louisiana, everything, every discussion was about race. It just was nothing — We had a governor's race, it was all about race. And just one day I just said, "Black people are getting the short end of this stick." And then just decided it was really, it wasn't much more complicated than that, because there was just no —

Plus, I was just sick of talking about it. I just can't — Can we just talk about something else? It's just anything, please. Of course, you couldn't.

So that basically is the — In 1964, myself and two or three other guys went up to Southern, which was at that time, the largest Black university in the world, and organized the Young Democrats. They said, "God, what's it like? What y'all doing up there? You crazy?" Well, it was just, it was a foreign country almost.

I'll tell you somebody about the young getting in politics and I get this question a lot. You will know very soon if you have a knack for this, and I've seen some people that, highly educated, highly intelligent, that don't have a knack for politics. I've seen some that have not been highly educated, not intelligent, that do have the knack.

The most important thing I would say is put yourself in a position that you have a chance to succeed. If you want to work on a campaign, try to find what you think would be a good one and just be persistent in getting in where and just do some research, hopefully the campaign manager, she or he or whatever the pronoun is these days, will give you a chance. But you're not going to go anywhere in this business on your own. As Bob Squaw says, "You got to march in front of the bandstand."

KRISTOL: What about elected officials, what could they, people who are thinking of running. Advice. You must get this question, I get it all the time, you must get it many more times. What should I do to prepare? How should I think about it? What's the trick to success?

CARVILLE: Well, first of all, let's say you want to run, what's the first — First thing you do is you look at what you're running for. The state senate. All right, so you say, "how many people —" And again, we're going back to Rodin. We got our chisel and we got our piece of marble. The first thing I'm going to chisel out is all of the people that we know that are going to vote, and we know are not going to vote for us. Now, we take all the people we know that are going to vote and going to vote for us, chisel them away. All right, so then you go to your three buckets left, people who are a low propensity to vote and a low propensity to vote for you, people with a low propensity to vote, but a high propensity to vote for you, and then the somewhat shrinking, but still relevant, number of people that might vote either way.

Then you got to design your campaign, with the key group, of course, which is low propensity to vote, but high propensity to vote for you. If you can do that in a way that doesn't get the low propensity to vote, but local propensity to vote for you — You get what I'm saying? You got your different buckets here.

Once you figure your buckets out, all right, once you get them figured out, then strategically you're ready to go. And I would tell anybody that's running for any offices, it's the Roger Mudd question. I always tried to teach my candidate, you want the question you don't want. They want to ask you this, if you know you had a DUI when you were in college, don't say, "I hope they don't answer the question," because I want that son of a bitch to answer the question.

Bill Scranton's, Thornburgh had been governor of Pennsylvania. Casey had won three times before he'd lost, and he was "the three time loss from Holy Cross". Bill Scranton was, his daddy was the governor of Pennsylvania. He was an icon. He was actually not a terribly bad guy. He

was kind of weird. And we're in a debate. Then of course, he'd been saying this and we knew it. And he said, "You're three time loss from Holy Cross, and you've lost a lot. And Pennsylvania is like a butterfly. It's emerging and has a new economy and what our grade," or whatever he meant.

And Casey said, "So let me tell you something. You're right. I've been on the canvas. And I've got another message for you. Sometimes the view from the canvas can be very educational. I know a lot of people in Pennsylvania that have been knocked down, but you know what they do? They do what I do. They get back up. You've never gotten back up, because you've never been knocked down." Oh, you just got knocked down, right flat on your fucking ass.

KRISTOL: That's good. Well, that's like Biden, right? Biden uses a version of that. He used a version of that in 2020.

CARVILLE: You teach that you want, you actually want the question that they think you don't want.

KRISTOL: Right, and how about, go back one more step, so a 30-year-old, a 33-year-old kid, who served in the military maybe after college and wants to go back home and run for office. Even before his campaign, how does he even think about it? Do you encourage him to look for the right district? Or do you just take a gamble? Or what's the kind of right way to think?

CARVILLE: Don't take a gamble. First of all, you got to run in some district that you have some chance to win. So you're not going to go to Matt Gaetz's district, and if you're a Democrat, and win. You're not going to go to a — So yes, you're have to, and look, there's nothing wrong with politics. There's nothing wrong with saying, "All right, I want to do this. I'm ambitious. This is the best place I think I can do it."

Again, it's no good if you don't have a path to win it. So you have a path there, and then what do you want to talk about? What do you think? How do you frame the issues? Most people have a — a lot of people are motivated. They start out they "want to help the community," or that kind of stuff. You hear that. Okay. How do you want to help the community? We all want to help the community. "Well, I'm interested in art education." Great. Okay. Don't tell anybody that. You just have to chisel it down to what it is. What's your rationale, and it takes a lot of practice. A lot of asking yourself, "If they say this, if they do this, then what do we do, and how do I go about this?" It just, it takes some discipline, but there's no magic thing that I or anybody else say, "Well, if you do these three things, you're going to be successful." If you do these three things, you can put yourself in a place to be successful. That's it.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's good.

CARVILLE: But you're won't get there unless you give yourself a chance.

KRISTOL: Yeah. I'll let you go in a second. Most talented political figure you've worked with? I mean, elected official.

CARVILLE: Bill Clinton, not even close.

KRISTOL: What's the short reason?

CARVILLE: Just could pick up, his mind was like a sponge. We'd do [inaudible] eight o'clock in the morning, in 10 minutes, he knew. Plus he's just natural with people, natural. But even he had this thing that he thought he could, it was kind of his weakness with his friends. He thought he could talk anybody into anything. I think John Brummett once said, "Bill Clinton could talk a dog out of a pork chop." There's some truth to it. But the just sort of raw political talent, he's as good as anybody that I've ever worked for.

But I've worked for some interesting people, I guess the most interesting one was Columbia. We had a run-off, and we actually ranked second in the first round. I couldn't be there and a friend of mine was a former CIA agent, so I sent him down there, and he'd write these elegant reports of what was going on, on the ground in Columbia. I'm thinking about putting it in one of my books about how — and of course the guy ended up winning a Nobel Prize — and so how did a Nobel Prize [winner] and a CIA agent and a Cajun guy from Louisiana end up in Bogota? Just one of these funny stories.

Some of the candidates I worked for — Bob Casey was a man I really looked up to in a lot of ways. He was a very different guy. Zell and I, we became closer toward the end of his life. It was a lot of good experiences. Some of these foreign campaigns were really fun. I love working in Israel.

KRISTOL: Yeah. I remember, we talked about that once. That's another thing we'll have to do a whole separate conversation on.

CARVILLE: Oh, I don't know what — Bibi's not going to be able to form of government. Is he?

KRISTOL: For the last five or eight years, everyone has said, well, time is up for Bibi, and then he seems to —

CARVILLE: He's coming back.

KRISTOL: It's amazing.

CARVILLE: He is. That's the one thing about Israeli politics. They're not looking for the new face.

KRISTOL: No, not yet at least.

CARVILLE: Not yet, but they —

KRISTOL: You look around, yeah. They'll have to do a generational transformation too, sort of like us.

CARVILLE: Shimon Peres? How long was Shimon Peres in Israeli politics? I couldn't even —

KRISTOL: From the beginning, he was the last, really, I guess, of the founding generation.

CARVILLE: He died a couple years ago.

KRISTOL: Almost founding generation. It's amazing. I'll let you go. You got to help save the Democratic Party here, which is important for the country, but thank you, James, for joining me today. I really appreciate it.

CARVILLE: You bet.

KRISTOL: We'll do it again in maybe six months and give the Biden administration a report card, and you'll tell us what's going to happen in 2022, so that'll be good.

CARVILLE: All right, man. Thank you. It was great.

KRISTOL: Thank you, and thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]