

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Conversations with Bill Kristol

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I. A Political Realignment? (0:15 – 26:39)

KRISTOL: Hi, I'm Bill Kristol, welcome to CONVERSATIONS. I'm joined today by Sean Trende, Senior Elections Analyst for RealClearPolitics, Visiting Fellow at AEI, American Enterprise Institute, and really one of the best in my opinion. A hardheaded analyst of elections and our politics more broadly, that I've had the pleasure of knowing over the last decade or so. I always read Sean, he's skeptical about many of these big theories, including some of mine at the time. So I've always learned a lot from his, as I say, hardheaded, willingness to look at the facts and not simply indulge in different wishes about how the electorate is going in the direction one wants it to go, as opposed to what it really is. So Sean, thanks for joining me today.

TRENDE: Thanks for having me. I'm excited to be here.

KRISTOL: I look forward to this conversation. So let's talk about, I mean, about elections, about the electorate, where we are politically, in the broad sense of terms of our parties and the electoral situation. I guess we should begin — maybe at the end we'll go back a little bit to the broader moment we're in with partisanship and polarization, all that — but maybe we should just begin, go from 2020, to today, to 2022, and maybe 2024. Where are we? So if someone asked you, "What's the current situation?" Our most recent big national election was November, 2020. What did it tell us about the Democrats, the Republicans, the voters?

TRENDE: Yeah, I think the best way to look at 2020 is that Democrats basically won three coin tosses to get the trifecta that they have. Those coin tosses, one of them, or all of them could easily have gone the other way. I mean, their House majority is five seats. Their Senate majority, if Purdue had gone up, I think 13,000 votes, there wouldn't have been a Georgia runoff for him. Trump, I think it's like 20,000 votes flipping across Georgia, Arizona, and Wisconsin. So it was a close election. We could talk about the popular vote, which is a different story, but in the metric that we use to select our office holders and that the parties compete for, it was a very close election. But Democrats did get the trifecta and they are using that trifecta.

TRENDE: I think for 2024, I mean, who knows, that's a long way away. For 2022, it's more interesting. During the pandemic, I played a lot of online chess so I think in those terms. One way, I think, to think about it is that the opening section is over. We saw that with the first 100 days and the COVID relief bill. Now we're getting into the mid-game, where you have your basic setup and you can see the different lines, but there're just a ton of ways it could go. I think the chess on this infrastructure bill/reconciliation bill is just fascinating with the players trying to position themselves to come across with a win, or at least avoid a devastating loss.

KRISTOL: So let's come back to that in a minute. We're talking just in late June when the thing is up in the air, the infrastructure bill or bills, but just to go back to 2020 for a second. So basically, what you're saying, it's evenly divided electorate in most of the key, relevant ways. I suppose that's true, if you look at gubernatorial elections, I think Republicans have a slight advantage, state, legislative chambers and so forth. But I mean, that's what we begin from. For all the drama of Trump and this and that, and Obama, two very unusual American presidents and the genuine job, I would say, in terms of certain issues and challenges to our institutions and so forth, as an actual matter of just electoral math, we're at a pretty evenly divided country. I guess just to go backwards a little bit, we have been for quite a while, right?

I mean, in the popular vote, what was 2020? It was plus four Democrat, 2012 was plus four Democratic, plus 2016 was struck down to plus two, people were a little tired after eight years of Obama. I mean, it's astonishing to have that level of — The House and the Senate bounced a little bit back and forth, but with not huge differences I guess, in the vote. So anyway, yeah, so, that's what we begin from in 2020. Is that a fair way of putting it?

TRENDE: Yeah, so David Beiler and I, also a *Weekly Standard* alum, as well as RCP, now at *Washington Post*, we devised an index of party strength that looks at all these things together: presidents, Senate, House, governors, and state legislatures. What we found is that since about '94, since Republicans became competitive in the House, that metric hasn't budged much. I mean, it's gone one way or the other, like obviously Democrats got a spike in 2008, but we see nothing, and we have seen nothing like what we saw in a 1976 situation or 1936, where you just have a dominant party who keeps that dominance for an extended period of time. Even the Obama win in 2008, didn't extend as far down ballot as they would've liked. So I think, we can argue if it's 50/50, maybe 51/49 Democrat, give them a little bit of an edge in popular vote totals, but closely divided that either party can win if they want to.

KRISTOL: I suppose changes in the composition of each party, demographic and electoral composition of each party, states moving in different directions, and then social economic groups moving in different directions, but evening out, netting out, kind of, right?

TRENDE: Yeah. It's fascinating. Republicans thought with white working class voters coming over, they'd finally done what they needed to. That was their dream was to get white working class voters voting like the suburbanites, but those white working class voters believe a lot of things that the suburbanites don't like. So they got pushed out of the party. But fascinating, in this last election you started to see Hispanic conservatives vote like white conservatives, it's because they like a lot of things that the white working class voters like. So there's just this constant give and take. It's a thread we see in American electoral history, that a party brings one group in, that group pushes another group out, like a water balloon. You push down on one end and another side pops out. That's just been the story of the last 30 years.

KRISTOL: Which is a bit of a break though from at least much of the 20th Century, where the conventional wisdom, I remember when I studied this a little in grad school, was more the sun and the moon, I can't remember whose formulation that was, was that —

TRENDE: Lavelle.

KRISTOL: Lavelle, there's usually a major party and a minor party and a major ideology in a sense, and a minor ideology, liberalism and conservatism. Then conservatism comes up and liberalism becomes a minority view. But it's interesting. So you're saying that this last quarter century or so, really somewhat different.

TRENDE: Yeah. I mean, I think the periodization view of things is more controversial today. But I think what everyone would agree on is that the last 30, 40, years neither party has been able to establish an upper hand. Even in the '70s and '80s, when Republicans were putting up big electoral wins and you had Jimmy Carter's very narrow win as an interregnum, the Democrats were racking up huge congressional majorities, but things have just been very close. Occasionally, you'll get 2008 when Democrats go up to 258 seats, which still doesn't get to the 300 they had in '76. But generally speaking, it's been pretty narrow margins. A party gets 230 seats, which is enough to do something, but not enough to dominate.

KRISTOL: Someone like me looks at the last five months, almost six months analysis, it's five and a half months since Biden was inaugurated, and also six months almost since January 6th and think, we've got all this drama and turmoil and surely people's judgments have changed. And correct me if I'm wrong, but my sense is from just looking at the polls, that basically the electorate is where it was on November 3rd, 2020. Is that right? As we speak in late June, 2021?

TRENDE: Yeah. I mean, most of the polling has Biden at a 52% job approval, which is similar to the 51% of the vote he got. The party ID hasn't shifted dramatically like we did see briefly in 2009, a lot of the special elections have been about what we'd expect, based on 2020 results. So yeah, no giant shifts in the electorate so far.

KRISTOL: So for all the drama of the opening game, to use your chess analogy and especially January 6th, we're in a middle game that's fairly evenly balanced. So talk about then, what things do you think would jostle things one way or the other or wouldn't? I mean, maybe it's too hard to jostle anything in the near future— well, for the next 18 months, let's just say, for the first year and a half, first two years of the Biden presidency, what would you be looking for?

TRENDE: I agree. I think the first six months, the opening game has been largely a wash. You've had some trading of pieces and some dramatic moves, like you said, January 6th, and the second impeachment, it's amazing to believe that was only six months ago.

KRISTOL: I know, five, yeah, right.

TRENDE: But when you get to the mid-game, if where things seem to be heading is a wash, you get this bipartisan infrastructure bill through maybe, and then there's almost certainly going to be some form of reconciliation. But if it's a smaller reconciliation bill, I think both parties then have something to crow about. Joe Biden gets to point towards, "I've made Washington work again" Republicans get to say, "Hey, we're willing to be reasonable when Democrats are reasonable."

Where you have a situation, potentially for one party or the other, is let's say, these talks drag on another two or three months, and then they fall apart and there's no infrastructure bill. Then for whatever reason, they can't get through the reconciliation bill with 50 votes, then all of a sudden the progressive base is furious.

On the other hand, you can imagine a situation where Republicans get rolled, right? They sign up for this infrastructure bill and then Democrats pass a massive reconciliation bill on top of it. It's like, you've gotten all the spending, but all they did with the infrastructure bill is free up the tax dollars to pay for more stuff for Democrats.

So those are the three big scenarios, I think. Looming over all is the question of whether, if Joe Manchin were to get so fed up with Republicans on these infrastructure negotiations that he decides to modify or change his stance on the filibuster, that's when it's like "Katie, bar the door," and all bets are off.

KRISTOL: I mean, I guess one question is how much do all these legislative proposals and then the actual laws and actual policies and actual results of policies matter anymore? I mean, I like to think in a rational world, I'm just making this up, obviously, but if Biden produces economic growth of 1.5%, it will be a different outcome in November '22, than if he produces economic growth, let's just say, without inflation of 4.5%. Or if the pandemic is handled extremely well, as opposed to badly. Or to take other things that could happen, the withdrawal from Afghanistan might tragically blow up in a terrible way or be reasonably uneventful. I mean, you think that reality would —

How much does it matter and how much are things just dug in and all these events are going to happen and then we're going to have votes that look an awful lot like 2020, with some slight changes, depending on candidates and so forth, in 2022?

TRENDE: So I think, one way to think about this is in a comparison to 2009, 2010. Obama spent almost all his capital and his filibuster proof majority on the stimulus and Obamacare, which were big spending bills by the standards of the time. But in terms of a structural change in American politics, it just wasn't. It was another social entitlement program, ended up being a lot narrower, I think, than conservatives feared and liberals hoped.

What's going on now, and what conservatives have to have some — I think it's overblown, but have to have some fear about — is that Democrats are talking about more structural change. The anti-gerrymandering proposals in HR1, the possibility of Puerto Rico statehood or DC statehood, which

Manchin opposes, but who knows? Comprehensive immigration reform. These things that could potentially alter the balance of power in a meaningful way. I think in the short to medium term, Republicans would actually benefit from having the filibuster go away. But in terms of talking about 2022, if they lose the powers to draw lines, or the lines have to be drawn in a way to conform to these partisan fairness metrics, which I have some issues with, that does change the 2022 playing field substantially.

KRISTOL: But that's still saying that it's really an electoral tactics matter, more than a results matter, so to speak. I mean, presumably if there's a massive, Great Depression, the party in power will be penalized. But it is striking how untethered the election results seem to be, more or less from the actual, real world results in some ways or other, I don't know, maybe not.

TRENDE: Yeah. So Michael Barone's last book actually had a throw-away line in it that really got me thinking, and I want to write about this, I just haven't put it together. So public opinion polling shows up in the middle of the Great Depression, regression analysis, we start getting data that we can use for stuff in the '50s and '60s. That's when people start saying, "Oh, elections are all about the economy." But you can look back over the broader sweep of history and see elections that just weren't, 1910, for example, 1890.

So the question is, "What if all we've been measuring with these models is a fluke in American politics where the people who were voting had their lives defined by a singular event, the Great Depression? Now that we are moving to where pretty much everyone has enjoyed some degree of prosperity — we can debate the experience of millennials — but what if economics just doesn't have the same impact anymore, since you no longer have a large voting block that lived through a 20-year or 15-year downturn?"

I think that's interesting. I think it's possible that the old adage about people voting their pocketbooks just isn't as strong today, as it was 20 years ago.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's interesting, because as I vaguely recall from grad school and reading about the 1880s and '90s, it was ethnic, religious, regional voting, and you had massive depressions in those decades and come backs from depressions, and transformations of the economy, obviously, with railroads and all this and lots of modern industry. But yeah, it does seem like that's not actually what people were so much voting on. Maybe in 1896, I don't know if McKinley / Bryan was at a referendum on the economic future in a sense. But even there, it was more what kind of what country you wanted, not so much, what the economic results of the preceding year or five years had been, I think. I mean —

TRENDE: Yeah, even 1896, after a horrific downturn, where Democrats had complete control, it was a five point race. It wasn't 1932.

KRISTOL: So maybe our Great Depression inflected way of thinking about all this, FDR, New Deal, yeah, is more of an exception than the rule. Or at least isn't the only way to think about elections and democracies, that's for sure, or not democracy.

TRENDE: Yeah. I think if you look at a year like 1890, when the economy was growing, but people were furious at Republicans for getting way ahead of where the country was on a lot of important social issues, like Prohibition and government spending and stuff like that, they lost 100 House seats.

Maybe we are moving back more towards a politics of that, where it is really more about culture and the parties haven't fully aligned on those lines yet, but we're starting to see that shape up, instead of class. We see that in exit polls, where the wealthy don't vote overwhelmingly Republican anymore, and the working class aren't overwhelmingly Democratic.

KRISTOL: I suppose if you add to that polarization and hyper-partisanship, then you don't get the 100-seat swings, you get 40-seat swings, maybe. So you get culture-dominating and stability of a kind. I mean, it's trench warfare stability, it's not comity and negotiated deals stability, but it is a kind of stability, electorally, at least, right?

TRENDE: Yeah, yeah, I think that polarization is something you have to figure out how to build in. If you had told me, I think if you told either of us, 10 years ago, well, first Donald Trump is president, we'd both laugh, but that in the second quarter, there's going to be a 30% downturn in the economy, 400,000 Americans are going to die of a disease, there's going to be a massive racial uprising, what's the election result going to be? I think we both would say the incumbent loses by 15, 20 points. And it was a close race. So I think people haven't fully grappled with that outcome and it's going to require some substantial rethinking of how we approach these things.

KRISTOL: Yeah. That's interesting. And I think I was going to ask you about it. I will ask you about the internal workings of both parties and how much that affects things. But I suppose one answer might be at the top, might be less than people like me who care a lot, is it a Trumpy Republican party, is it a non-Trumpy Republican party? I'm not sure the voters care as much as I do about that. And I'm not sure one can show empirically that one or the other produces slightly different results in different states obviously, but I don't know. How much does it matter which side do we want to go with?

Let's begin with the Democrats. How much does it matter in October of 2022 if the Democrats look like a Biden, reasonably moderate party that's willing to be somewhat tough on crime? Eric Adams wins in New York City. Terry McAuliffe let's say becomes governor of Virginia this year in 2021. We have therefore an old-fashioned, let's just say, liberal Democratic party, Clinton, Biden sort of party, as opposed to looking like AOC at all or in the driver's seat. How much does that matter?

And then obviously on the Republican side, the question would be, does it matter if a bunch of Trumpy candidates win set of primaries in Ohio, Pennsylvania, North Carolina and stuff, as opposed to establishment candidates? Or does it maybe at the margin, but really much less than people like me would like to think it should matter?

TRENDE: Yes. Exactly. I think it doesn't matter as much as you would think. One good thing about doing this from Ohio is that when I go to the bus stop and talk with the other parents while the kids are getting on the bus, I get a better cross section of what's on people's minds, and politics just doesn't come up that often. A week before election, people start really talking about it. And when there's a major event, people talk about it, but people just weren't talking about the January 6th riot / uprising / insurrection after a couple of weeks. We're talking about kids and whatnot.

So I think it matters. I do think it matters at the margins. If the Democrats become an AOC party, upper middle class voters don't want to be back to the days of a 70% marginal rate or even 50%. And so there's a danger for Democrats pushing these voters, their weakest members, out of the coalition.

I think if Republicans continue to go full Trump, I think those same suburbanites — I think you saw suburbanites in 2016 hold their nose and vote for Trump. In 2018 and 2020, they're like, some did, some didn't. I do think there's a danger if in 2022 and 2024, you have the similar brand of the Republican party that a lot of these suburban ancestral Republican areas are just going to be Democrat from now on. So I think there is risks for both parties there.

KRISTOL: Do you think on the Republican side, that they can straddle, that you can be a business-type Republican, do a lot of accommodating with Trumpiness and Jane Timken running in Ohio for the Senate for example, now I just saw one of her leaflets. Not someone I would have said was Trumpy five years ago, but she's loyal to Trump and all this. But if you're an upper middle class voter, you can also say, look, she's not Marjorie Taylor Green. She's a very wealthy person and so forth and cares a lot about, isn't really going to go off the deep end. If you were talking to Kevin McCarthy or top Republican strategists, can they navigate this? Are they navigating it adequately from their point of view? What are the greatest risks?

TRENDE: In a lot of ways to me, Trump is like Obama. He has a singular appeal to a group of voters that are detached from the electoral process. And he brings those voters in and helps the party out. But when he's not on the ticket or when he's not president, you struggle trying to recreate that energy or that vibe.

And I think we see that with Republican candidates like McCarthy reading *Green Eggs and Ham*. Trump could have done that and pulled it off for a certain amount of voters. But McCarthy is just like, "Come on. This isn't who you are." And so I do think it's tough for Republicans.

I think there are lessons. I do think there are genuine lessons to be learned from Trumpism. I think immigration reform just doesn't sell to a large chunk of the Republican base and Republicans have to figure out how to finesse that message a little better.

I don't know about foreign policy. I actually think the base is probably less Trumpy on foreign policy than a lot of people want to think. Or more that they think Trumpism is actually more like "kick the tires and light the fires" than the American conservative wants to believe it is.

So, it's hard because at the end of the day, Trump and Obama were authenticity candidates. They just sold to a group of people that desperately wanted a politician to sell to them. And it's just hard for people who aren't those candidates to come off as authentic and sell like they can. So I think it's going to be hard for Republicans.

KRISTOL: So in 2022, that's a challenge for them to keep the Trump energy and turnout without turning off the swing voters they turned off in 2018. Trump's not on the ballot the way he was in 2018. It seems to me then a lot of people did vote in congressional races to try to have at least a House that would check Trump. It's a little hard to make that case in 2022, I think because Trump's not president. So if anything, maybe you want a House that would check Biden. What do you think about that?

TRENDE: Yeah, there's obviously a longstanding tradition in America that midterm elections, they don't have to be blowouts for the party in power, but they sometimes go poorly. They tend to go not great for the party in power. So I think there will be some swing against Biden.

But as far as maximizing gains, it's hard for Republicans. They also have to figure out if they want to do that two-step of, "Yeah, I'm Trumpy, but not really of Trump." There's a large chunk of the base that

doesn't want to hear that "but not of Trump." And I think it's not that hard for Democrats, especially in areas where the media is more sympathetic to them, to okay, "Let's pick at that and try to drive a wedge. Okay. Do you like it when Trump does this? How come when Trump came to your district, you didn't appear on stage with him? Or look, you did appear upon stage with him, how can you say you're not Trumpy?" There's just all kinds of minefields for Republicans.

I think though the flip side is Democrats drew a huge amount of energy from Trump's presidency. And so with Trump not having a Twitter account and not having Facebook, and not being on the news every night, do you get that? Can Democrats duplicate the energy they got in 2018 and 2020, especially when they have a boring Biden president? I like that, but I'm not sure partisans on either side do.

II: 2022 and 2024 (26:39 – 1:08:25)

KRISTOL: And what do you think is the actual balance of power in most, maybe it differs, obviously, from state to state and district to district, between the Trump loyalists or the Trump accommodators and the non-Trump Republicans which is a small number? Do you think in fact that people like Cheney, and Gonzalez in Ohio, and Herrera Butler are in real danger? The odds that they get knocked off by a loyal to Trump challenger are pretty good? Or just, one or two might lose, but most of the incumbents continue to win? How strong is that sentiment, do you think, within the Republican party? And then what about the open seats where there are some states that will be fairly clear choices I would say between an establishment-ish Republican and a real Trump loyalist?

TRENDE: Yeah. I think it depends. I go back and forth on that. It really depends. If we did this on a different day, you'd get a different answer out of me, but I think Cheney is in real trouble. She comes from an extremely Trumpy state. She is political royalty there, but I think because she has been so high profile on this, she's going to have a tough row to hoe.

Someone like Anthony Gonzalez, some of the state party factions are mad at him, but I just don't know come August of 2022 whether people are still going to be mad at him, or if there's just going to be so many other votes and issues that have come up between now and then that people are like, "He's our congressman. We send him back." I remember when he played wide out, and I liked him then. But Cheney, because she's been so high profile, she's taken a lot of damage, so we'll see.

KRISTOL: And I suppose how strong and how much it matters if Trump came into Ohio just last weekend to attack Gonzalez and support his young challenger, Max Miller. Does Trump personally move a lot of votes? Or do you think that has faded some, it is fading, was always overstated or not?

TRENDE: I think the best thing that's happened to these Republicans and Republicans in general is having Trump's Facebook and Twitter accounts. I have heard almost nothing about Trump's visit to Ohio. It's just been off the radar screen. You saw a clip of it on the news, but it's not something everyone's talking about.

KRISTOL: And it's pretty close to you, right?

TRENDE: Yeah. It's about an hour away. I didn't even know he was coming until I saw it on Twitter. So the removal of his megaphone, I think, has really set him back. You can see him flailing, trying to find these other megaphones, his blog and his whatever. Now, who knows? Once we get into election season and people are tuned in and the news media is going to start really pushing his speeches again,

probably, maybe he breaks through then but his appearance here really was a nothing burger, I think, unless you were a hardcore Trump supporter that follows his every move.

KRISTOL: Yeah. That's a question, there's an awful lot that could happen in the next 18 months and will happen because it's not like Biden doesn't have an agenda that goes beyond the stimulus package. He has in fact things he wants to do on immigration. And some of them will be bi-partisan, it looks like maybe. Some of them much less so. He could pull back on some, but not all of those things. And then things will happen in the real world. There either will or won't be more crossings to the border and so forth. So there will be opportunities presumably for Trump and others to highlight certain issues in ways that maybe right now they're not front and center.

Because there are two things that are unknown. One, what are those issues and which way do they cut? And a lot depends on just real world developments that you can't predict in foreign policy, immigration, the economy.

And then secondly, how much does all that matter in the sense that maybe it's all built in though? So, maybe people don't — if you're really an immigration voter, you're already upset about Biden, the border is not secure. And if you're not an immigration voter, it's very complicated. And maybe it doesn't change, even if people like us are now suddenly following immigration the way we're following infrastructure. That's what's hard to read.

TRENDE: So if you look at 2010, that was an election that built over time. At this point in 2009, I was one of the only people saying, "Hey, Republicans might take the House." And even that was maybe if things go their way. It was like, okay, Obama did the stimulus. And that got a bunch of conservative Republicans really tuned in, but it was actually fairly popular after it passed. And then the economy didn't do as well as planned. So people got grouchy and then Obamacare hit and people got really grouchy. And then after Obamacare passed, Democrats, the economy still improved slowly. In other words, 2010 was really death by 1,000 cuts.

And so I think it's the same thing with the news stories for this. If inflation doesn't go away, if they're wrong and it's not just a temporary post-pandemic blip, that's going to make some people cranky. And if Biden goes "yolo" and starts pushing all these big plans and trying to get them done, that's going to make more people cranky. And so it really just depends how all these little events line up. I don't think we're in a time now, as we said earlier, where there's one big singular thing that can move the electorate. But I do think you get four or five bad steps and a party can find itself, at least in the short-term, in a tough situation.

KRISTOL: 2010, there were also — the Democrats had won so many seats in 2006 and '08 that there was a lot of seats to "give back" as it were, which isn't quite the situation now. The Republicans won back already 10, 12 less vulnerable seats in 2020. So I think in that respect, there's probably just less variance, fewer weak seats on either side now to be picked off. But again, one says that, and then of course, history surprises you and there's a 50 seat swing or something. It doesn't feel like there's going to be though.

TRENDE: No, no, unless Republicans come up with some devilishly brilliant or evil, depending on your point of view, maps in some of these states, but I think that's right. There was something like 43 Democrats in districts that McCain had carried in 2008. So just very hot and McCain was losing by seven

points nationally. Just very high levels of exposure that just aren't there for either party now that we're through the big ideological sort.

But you can start looking at — I'm still curious. What I'm really looking at are the suburban Democrats that won in 2018, Elissa Slotkin in Michigan, some of these other districts, what they look like when they're redrawn. And then if there's even just a modest pullback against Democrats in the suburbs, a lot of these seats could become marginal really fast.

KRISTOL: I know and we have a couple in Virginia. The number's probably more like 10 or 20 though. The 43 is such a wonderful, that's such a good case study. So 43 seats, it's just that McCain loses by seven points and nonetheless carries 43 districts that are Democratic districts going into 2010. And of course there's redistricting after 2010. So there's no issue there of redistricting. The current numbers, if I'm not mistaken, are of Democratic seats that Trump won and Republican seats that Biden won are both five or seven or something like that, single digits, on either side. Compared to 43, that's pretty startling.

The sorting has really happened over the last decade. I think people like me who follow it day-to-day, week-to-week, it is a little like a frog in the boiling water. You don't quite appreciate how dramatic that's been and the implications of that, the partisanship / polarization sorting, whatever you want to call it, some of it reinforced by some gerrymandering, but a lot of it absent too. Look at the Senate too. That's really a change. It's a new situation in that respect, it seems to me, than it was even a decade ago, let alone 40 years ago.

TRENDE: Yeah. I mean, for people like you and me, I don't think I've fully internalized that Joe Manchin and Jon Tester are really the only Democrats in the Senate from deep red states. And we can debate whether Maine is still a deep blue state, but that leaves Susan Collins.

KRISTOL: Right.

TRENDE: The days where you had John Breaux and Sam Nunn and all these Democrats that came from really, really Republican states at the presidential level, but still elected people like Breaux by double digit margins, those days, just at least in the medium term, are gone.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

TRENDE: And so that's hard to internalize.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I'll get the number wrong, but I think this came up in conversation with Ron Brownstein a few months ago. I think when I came to Washington in '85, there was something like, I think half the Senate delegations were split. So there are 50 Senate delegations of two senators each, about 25 of them were one of each party. New York certainly was. D'Amato and Moynihan. There were many like that. And then the others were loyalty. So, about half of each conference, if you want to think of it this way, if it were an evenly divided Senate, would consist of senators from a presumably solid state, a Republican or Democratic state, and half of each conference, 25 or so of the senators in each party were from split states that were presumably somewhat in play.

Now I think it's six senators. Twenty-two states — do I have this right? Let me just have, I don't know — have unified delegations. And there are something like six Senate delegations that are split. West

Virginia with Manchin, Maine with Collins, and so forth. Pennsylvania with Toomey, at least for now. Ohio with Sherrod Brown. But I think I had literally six of them.

So if I've got the math right, so that would be 23 or 22 unified delegations and six that are split, with three of each. So when the Republican conference meets, it meets with — And the Democratic conference meets, since they're the same number now, it meets with 44 members who come from single-party states to some degree. Now, not all of them were really single-party. Georgia's not really a single-party state, obviously. And six who come from states where their colleague is from the other party. That just changes the dynamics of legislation and of the Congress and of politics so dramatically, I think. That's such a massive change. It's not sort of a little bit more in one direction or another. And of course, that's the Senate, so there's no gerrymandering.

TRENDE: Yeah. Yeah. That's actually a really interesting point that I hadn't thought of. Because you have to work with your — A split delegation guarantees you have at least one contact on the other side of the aisle that you work with closely.

KRISTOL: You have to work with, just for — Like McCain, yeah, practical things, like getting —

TRENDE: Even if you hate each other, you still want to get the airstrip renovation in Lima done because it benefits both of you. So yeah, that is taken away.

And you also, part of why things seem so different now, and I think they are different was — One other illustration is that in 2008, I think from the Dakotas, you get two members of Congress and four senators, and five of them were Democrats. These overwhelmingly Republican states. But what would happen is you would have these Democrats from these red states that had a pull for their party. So they would try to get on board with stuff their party wanted to do if they could, but also had a pull for their state in the other direction. So if their party wants to do something crazy, there was like a, "No, we can't go there." And you had a bunch of Republicans the other way.

And so you had a situation where you could get judges confirmed, except in a few high profile situations, where you could get legislation like the Tax Reform Bill of '86 done. Like, big stuff could get done because you had party versus state politics that pulled people in different ways and kept them from going nuts. But those checks are gone, and you have a situation, from my understanding, that there's very little common camaraderie across the aisle in the Senate anymore. And it just, it makes for a very different, I think, dynamic.

KRISTOL: Yeah. And that old situation both enabled some kinds of legislation and, of course, blocked others, because the people weren't scared entirely to vote their state or regional interests against their party. At some point, things were just a bridge too far. And so on a lot of issues, things didn't happen that now, "we'll test it and see whether" — I mean, it is sort of impressive the degree to which McConnell was just able to hold senators for votes on taxes, but also on judges, which probably weren't quite in accord with every single senator's wishes or the state. But again, if 44 of your 50 senators come from basically — a one-party state is too strong — but a state in which both members are Republican, and which very often have a Republican governor, and which in every case in this case, Trump carried.

So you've got 44 Republican senators from states that have two Republican senators and Trump carried them. And 44 Democratic senators that have two Democratic senators and Biden carried them. So there the dynamic, the well of power of, "Gee, this may not be great for my state," versus "The president wants

it, or the former president wants it and my party leader wants it," I think that's very much different than it was back in the '80s or even 15 years ago when Ben Nelson of Nebraska could really exact a pretty big price, or he thought at least, for voting for Obamacare and so forth.

TRENDE: Yeah. Yeah. I was thinking, I think this is a really, really interesting insight I'm going to have to noodle on. But why are we talking about spending almost an order of magnitude higher than we were talking with Obama, right? I mean, they're talking about like a \$6 trillion reconciliation bill, and Obama's big stimulus was \$787 billion. And I think a lot of it is — It goes back to those 43 Democrats that were in McCain districts, who if Obama were to say, "Hey, I want to do a \$6 trillion stimulus," they'd be like, "No way. My district voted for McCain by 20 points. I can't do that." You see that somewhat with Manchin, too. Like, the last one who really puts on the brakes that way. But other than that, if you have a bunch of Democrats from Biden districts, why wouldn't they do pretty much anything Biden suggests?

KRISTOL: Yeah. It's funny. So you look at the Obama Senate with 60 and then 59, I guess, Democrats, right? After Scott Brown won. And you think, oh, that's more partisan or more, therefore, you might think, more ideological. But it's not, actually. It's sort of the opposite. It's 50/50 now both parties, and more ideological. It's kind of a paradox, I guess. And it makes you wonder.

So answer this as — Put on your Democratic strategist hat. I mean, is there some truth to the left's kind of mantra that all this talk about — Manchin exists, so you have to deal with him, but at the end of the day, Biden would better off jamming through everything he can, if you believe in those policies, obviously. If you and I think they're stupid policies, that's a different story.

But if you think those policies would be popular, let's just say, it would make a difference. Maybe it's HR-1 making a difference in gerrymandering, or other things making a difference in the actual healthcare and the environment and so forth. And if you think your constituents care about them, maybe the left isn't being entirely ideological. There's a sort of political half-truth to what they say, that all this talk about going to the center to make sure you don't alienate some tiny sliver of centrist voters and some tiny sliver of states that could go either way is less important than energizing your supporters by really showing that you deliver. Is there some truth to that, do you think? On either side, I guess?

TRENDE: No, I think there's definitely — I think the progressives are kind of onto something with that, that we have this two-year window. We're probably going to lose the House, and the Senate is up for grabs. Let's do everything we possibly can in these two years. And if you look back over American history, that's kind of how progressives have advanced. They get these short moments of control 1932-36, '64-'66, to a much lesser extent, 2008-2010, where they can get things pushed through, and then they kind of on to it as much as they can, and conservatives try to roll them back with varying degrees of success. And so I think, now, what makes that different is that they always had really big majorities to do it. I think it's a different ball game to try to make those massive changes with 50% plus one.

But at the same time, you can see the logic of trying to push things through again and then hold the line and bet that Republicans can't pull them back. I do think it's an interesting question why Republicans, when handed the opportunities, have been less willing to do that. Like, Democrats knew with Obamacare that a lot of them were doing a suicide run, that they were going to vote it through and a lot of them were going to lose their seats. If you look at the Bush presidency, a lot of what the Bush presidency accomplished was a watered down Democratic agenda, things like No Child Left Behind and the prescription drug benefit. Why are Republicans less likely or willing to go for those big ideas when they hold control? I don't know the answer to it, but —

KRISTOL: Or the left would argue that, in fact, the Iraq War was, I suppose, in reverse the kind of thing where he took advantage of a moment to jam something through. It was overwhelming votes in the Senate and the House, actually, but nonetheless, kind of maybe a mirror image thing. And I guess McConnell both being able to rally a much more polarized conference to block a Scalia replacement and then get through Barrett 10 days before the election might be also an instance where Republicans were willing, for something that their leadership and base really cared about, to go to the mat. And some other stuff, maybe they just don't have that many policies. Except for taxes. That was interesting in 2017, that they really cared enough about. And they probably paid some price for the tax bill in some of those districts in 2018, I suspect, for what they did in 2017.

But anyway, yeah. I think I do think this is a case where — It's funny. So on the one hand, you have this, as we said at the beginning, a certain stability in the electoral balance and the system, and then these kind of big changes underneath which slightly get masked by the stability and probably leads — I feel this about me, but yeah, leads one to sort of underestimate kind of how different things now are.

And I think this is so true within both parties where it's not — I mean, look, I would like to be able to say that being Trumpy, you're going to pay a huge electoral price for it. But I will say to my slight credit that I've never really made that argument much or bought that argument. I mean, I've always been against the Trumpiness of the Republican party for good reasons, I think, but I've never said it was politically necessarily suicidal. There's a lot of voters like that.

And it's not obvious to me that, with some exceptions on the real fringy side, probably, that nominating an established Republican is necessarily safer or better than nominating a Trumpy Republican. Again, with this caveat that at some point craziness still seems to be penalized by the electorate, and just seeming like a kind of total loose cannon. But we'll see, right? I don't know. I say that. Of course, then I think to myself, well, is it really penalized? I don't know.

I mean, January 6th remains a huge case study where, as you just said, I think the data supports you on this. Someone like me looks at that and thinks that is a huge moment in modern American history. It tells you a lot about the party. You really need to rethink a ton of things about the party and so forth. That's not where most voters are, honestly, and they're not sitting around worrying if their member of Congress is one of the 137 who voted to overturn the Pennsylvania or Arizona results or not. So it is —

TRENDE: Yeah. I think the way to think about it, what political scientists have found is that most voters use heuristics, right? Like, rules of thumb to decide how they vote. And the number one heuristic is party label, right? And I think for most people — Like in Ohio, for some reason, you vote for like — I'm not joking — we have elections for county recorder and for coroner. I'm not sure what the Republican or Democratic way to pronounce someone dead is, but I guess it exists. How do people make up their mind who to vote for for coroner? I mean, it's party ID. I guess the delivery here is that for most people, the party is the heuristic that drives the vote and not the other way around.

So if Jeb Bush had won in 2016, I think 98% of people would have cast their votes and been happy with Jeb Bush and come up with reasons to be proud to call themselves Jeb Bush Republicans. And the same thing happened with Donald Trump. He was a Republican. Most people were happy to be Donald Trump Republicans, because it was Republicanism that really drove the vote choice.

And you see it some with Democrats, right? Like, a lot of people who were proud Bill Clinton Democrats, today if Bernie Sanders were the nominee, would be like, "Yeah, I think things have changed in America," and you have all the rationalizations for why now Bernie Sanders was just peachy. And at the end of the day, it's really just, they're Democrats, and so they vote for the Democrat.

KRISTOL: Yeah. And I think that's really true. And you also swallow hard and accept a lot of things you don't like that much about certain — whether it would be Bernie Sanders or Donald Trump, right? I mean, but the party loyalty. Was it 91% of Romney voters in 2012 ended up voting for Trump in 2016, for all the drama of people not endorsing him, and Evan McMullin and this and that, and people like me saying it's unacceptable, but that's not what 91% of them thought.

And now some of them obviously were Trumpier in the first place and swallowed hard to vote for Romney, as they had been for Gingrich or Santorum in the primaries and so forth. But I guess, now, would you say the evidence does suggest — So in this underlying level, we're talking about, I guess the socioeconomic sorting and changes of the parties does change, of course, changes the balance of power within the parties. So that, I mean, again, one has to change one's expectations of who's going to win a nomination in some key states, because it's not going to look like a Republican primary in 1985 in Ohio, right? The actual voters are somewhat different voters than they were then.

TRENDE: That is absolutely true. And so it kind of gets back to the water balloons thing we were talking about at the beginning, like, Obama being elected kind of drove the last remaining Southern Appalachian Democrats out of the Democratic Party, right? West Virginia went from a state that was overwhelmingly Democratic, was one of Bill Clinton's strongest states in 1996, to a state that went for Romney by I think 40%. But the trick was that now, though — Okay, great, Republicans, now you have these voters, these working class, blue collar, Appalachian voters. They're going to be voting in your primaries and they're not going to be as excited by the Mitt Romney in the business suit, and so they're going to be more open to a candidate like Trump.

And now that those voters are Republican, if you want to be the Republican nominee in a state like Ohio, certainly West Virginia, you have to be able to appeal to those voters in the Republican primary. There's something I think Democrats are going to have to contend with as well, which is that these upper-middle-class suburbanites who are increasingly in the Democratic party are going to limit what Democrats are able to do. You can see it with the Democratic push to bring back the SALT deduction, right? Which is a massive giveaway to wealthier taxpayers, at least upper middle class taxpayers. And it's because now Democrats represent a lot more of these voters than they did 15, 20 years ago.

KRISTOL: When you were mentioning West Virginia, it reminds me that we probably — Not we, but I probably at least underestimate 2000 as a bit of a hinge point. It's been a gradual thing and a step-by-step thing, of course, the change in the character of both parties, and therefore the different states flipping in different opposite, directions. But I mean, Clinton being a Southern Democrat, Clinton/Gore being two Southern Democrats, one forgets that, held back that movement, I would say, in '92 or '96.

But Bush winning Gore's home state of Tennessee, Clinton's home state of Arkansas, West Virginia in 2000, all of which he needed to win to win the presidency — Bush didn't end up with that much of a margin, let's not forget. So at the time, it was kind of happening. And I don't know how much we focused on it. Tennessee I remember because that was Gore's state, but in a way that was a sign that we didn't have Bill Clinton's electoral —

I mean, Karl Rove took Bush to California. They flew to California a week before the election, remember? Because they thought, not crazily, that well look, California can be in play. It's got a Republican governor at the time, and had had one until I guess '98, Pete Wilson. And Reagan of course, Bush had won it in '88. But it was already moving, and it just kept moving more and more. So probably, I wonder how much people will look back at 2000 as a bit of a hinge point there.

TRENDE: Yeah, absolutely. There's a lot of ways you can interpret Bill Clinton as the birthing of the new Democratic coalition, but in a lot of ways it was the last gasp of the old one, right? He wins Georgia in '96, not because he does so well in the suburbs like Joe Biden, but because he runs well among white working class voters. And same thing with rural voters and same thing with Kentucky. If you look at the coal mine country in Kentucky, it is deep, deep blue in 1996, almost as deep red as it is today.

And so the fact that Joe Biden, I'm sorry, the fact that Bill Clinton carried those, is a lot like the old Southern Democrats, but he's the last one to do it. And I think those places are effectively gone. But like I said, a lot of the trends that we see today amongst suburbanites got underway and really started to become apparent in that 2000 election as well.

So yeah, I think also the disputed nature of that election really, I think we're still paying a price for that. I tend to view it as a national tragedy that it ended up being that close, because I think it drove a lot of the beliefs in bad faith of the other party. Democrats thought Republicans had stolen the election, Republicans thought that Democrats just refuse to accept the outcome of it. And I think to the extent that there is a rational basis for people's beliefs in politics, you can tie a lot of what was happening in 2016 and 2020 back to that.

KRISTOL: I think that's a good point. I, myself didn't tend to put that much weight on it. 9/11 happened pretty soon after and for people like me, who're interested in foreign policy, that became so dominant a theme. And also I would add the partisan Supreme Court decision, which perfectly correlated with who had appointed you to the court, if I'm not mistaken. I think that's right with which party you were from. Maybe not quite because you had Souter still, right? I guess that's right. But it sort of reinforced the notion that the Court is just another player in this partisan realignment and so forth.

TRENDE: Yeah, it was a tragedy top to bottom. The only reason it got to the Supreme Court of the United States was you had the Florida Supreme Court doing partisan stuff the other direction. At the end of the day, it was elections have error margins and that election was within the error margin. And both parties, I think have legitimate grievances that over the course of the last 20 years have just spun out of control and taken on a life of their own. A lot of the fights we have over vote suppression and vote fraud date back to that election as well.

KRISTOL: Maybe just a few minutes left, but let's see. One doesn't want to speculate about 2024, because it is a lifetime as the cliché goes, but do you have a general view about, sort of, governors who might be strong in either party? And do you think that Joe Biden can run, or is likely to run at the age he'll be? And if not, who might succeed? Or what kind of candidate might succeed, maybe more than the individual.

And then on the Republican side, where in the spectrum of — there's Trump, but then also pure Trump supporters, all the way over to non-Trump supporters — governors versus senators, thoughts on any of this?

TRENDE: Yeah. Joe Biden will be 82 years old and I don't want to be ageist, but that is old. And at the end of the second term, he would be 86 and it's a demanding job.

KRISTOL: Absolutely. I'm surprised, aren't you, that people do seem to think he wants to run and therefore will run. And I don't know what an awful lot of people say, look, he was fine at 78 when we had a national, liberal point of view, emergency. And he could just be the one guy who could win, bring the party together, bring the country together to some degree. And he's done that adequately, I think personally for these six months and his numbers reflect that at 52%, he hasn't lost at least any of his supporters. But I agree a prospective vote for four more years at that point? I don't know, maybe it could happen. And he's a healthy guy and all that, but I don't know.

TRENDE: Yeah, so let's assume he doesn't run. If he does run, we I think, know how it goes in the Democratic primary and then we'll see how people view his presidency.

If he doesn't run, I just think they have a very difficult time not giving it to Kamala Harris. I've never bought the hype. I view Kamala Harris as the person who got kneecapped by Tulsi Gabbard in the debate and I think her performance on the border has been shaky. I just don't think her political instincts are all that great. But you know, she's an African-American woman, the first woman vice president, first African-American vice president. I just do not see how the Democratic party as currently constituted, denies it to her. Assuming no major stuff.

For Republicans, I think Donald Trump just looms and there's no other way to put it. He's no spring chicken. He'll be 78, and unlike Biden I don't think he is in the greatest health. And so we'll see where he is. We'll see how serious these proceedings in the Manhattan District Court against him and the Trump Organization really are. If he runs, I don't know if he'll clear the field, but I think a lot of Republican governors and big ticket people will decide they'll wait until 2028 to run.

If he doesn't run, it's going to be one of the most fascinating primaries ever, because you have people like Ron DeSantis, who I think are a good example of smart Trumpiness, or we can debate whether it's smart, but intelligent Trumpiness. He's definitely a bright guy. You have people like Nikki Haley, who I think are trying to straddle the Romney versus Trump wings of the party. I don't think Hogan would have a chance, but I think he might give it a shot. To me it would be significant if he were to get 15% or even 20% of the vote versus two or three. From what I see, I think DeSantis is probably the non-Trump front runner right now, but history is littered with the front runner as of June of the odd numbered year who never makes it out of Iowa.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I think by 2023 history is littered with a lot of front runners who'd become the nominees actually it's not a bad predictor. But 2021 I agree, three years out it's sort of all kinds of governors and senators are in fashion. And then they go out of fashion and things happen in their states or whatever. They don't stand up to national scrutiny. It's hard to know. Yeah.

Christie, I think wants to run and there is maybe room for a less Trumpy, but still got along with him and endorsed him rather importantly, actually in 2016 and worked with him. But more odd if you're a sort of upper middle class Romney-ish Republican, Christie's maybe a little more acceptable to you than these other Southern Trumpy types. I don't know.

TRENDE: I think Trump's non-Southernness is an underrated factor in some of the success. Well, if you look at 2016, Trump did surprisingly well in Connecticut and Rhode Island. I mean, he didn't come close

to carrying them, but he didn't lose them by 30 points either. I think we still have a country that has these old regional divides and people pick up on it. I think Bush having the Texas accent really did hurt him in the Northeast. And I think Trump's speaking like he comes from Queens and not having the Southern evangelical vibe to him, just helped him in a lot of places that don't have a lot of Southerners or evangelicals. And so I think Christie would get some of that.

KRISTOL: It probably helped him put together the coalition, once he had Pence on the ticket, of the Southerners and evangelicals with the more non-Southern, not evangelical, white, working class in a place like Ohio and so forth, yeah.

TRENDE: Yeah, I think Pence will try to make a run of it, but I think he is not Trump or Trumpy and I just don't think he has the political knack in a way that most of the presidents we've had, did have.

KRISTOL: Final words. What should people look at? This conversation of course is intelligent. But intelligent people looking, I think they've got jobs, they're teaching physics somewhere or something, I mean, they can't pay attention to politics day-to-day and don't want to, but what should they look for over the next 18 months to get a sense of which way things are going within each party? And then sort of between the parties and in terms of the administration? What particular pieces of legislation, particular primaries, particular polling results that you follow that are more reliable than others? What do you tend to look at on the polling beat? Just generally approval? I mean the core?

TRENDE: Yeah. I think the number one indicator, if you only have five minutes each day to dedicate to politics would be to look at Joe Biden's job approval. And don't get caught up in the day to day, oh, he's at 52.5, now he's at 52.3. Polls really do have error margins. Pay more attention to the trends, right? Are you getting lower highs and lower lows? Are you getting higher highs and higher lows? That type of stuff matters a lot more than the day-to-day of polling.

And I think as we move to end game, once we get past this infrastructure bill / reconciliation, probably sometime, one way or the other, it's going to be resolved September, October, can they get anything done? Or is that the end of the legislative phase of Biden's presidency? If there is bipartisanship, does it start to spill over to other areas or is it just these two big spending bills and then inertia?

KRISTOL: And inertia's bad presumably for the incumbent president.

TRENDE: Yeah, I think so. I think so. People want to feel like Washington is getting something done.

KRISTOL: Any particular state primaries you're looking at, or for real x-ray into or I suppose 2021 general elections or x-ray into each party or to the electorate?

TRENDE: Yeah, I never thought I would say this, but I would pay attention to the Virginia gubernatorial race. I think McAuliffe still wins, but if it's a low to mid-single digit race, I don't think that's great for Democrats because the only way that happens is if the Republican ticket makes some inroads back into, not Fairfax, but like Loudoun County and Prince William.

KRISTOL: I think on that, I mean I live here in Virginia, I think if Youngkin the Republican wins, who's a very wealthy business type who certainly accommodated Trump quite a lot in the convention to get the nomination, is sort of edging away a bit now. I mean, if he does well, certainly if he wins, the lesson

which would have an effect, perhaps at least for donors and professionals maybe not on voters in other states and other primaries, is that's the ticket to the best of both worlds, right?

Your sort of business CEO who doesn't, but accommodates the Trumpiness, talks a lot about election tech, but he hasn't quite endorsed the big lie of the federal election, but pretends it's a big problem in Virginia, which it isn't. Whatever, "we need to take a fresh look at our own election integrity," but sort of navigates those rapids, I suppose, that will become, I think — who knows? Voters might just ignore all that and just nominate whoever they want, but I think for the professional class in the Republican party, that becomes a model going forward.

TRENDE: I think these races matter more than sometimes we think for the internal politics. I think Andrew Gillum and Stacey Abrams losing in Florida and Georgia really shaped the way a lot of party insiders viewed 2020 for the Democratic side. And so I think if you saw Youngkin and [inaudible], I can't remember the Lieutenant Governor nominee's name, but if you see them come close, if they win like, whoa, but if they come close, yeah, I think that's going to be the takeaway. That you need someone who won't send the Trumpers packing, but that can present at least a moderate face that's convincing to suburbanites that I'm not going to be tweeting mean things to the prime minister of Denmark because she won't sell me Greenland.

KRISTOL: That's a good note to end on. I had forgotten about that particular part of the Trump presidency as one of the few Trump initiatives I was somewhat sympathetic to. Bigger U.S., but we won't go into that now. Sean Trende, thank you very much for a very stimulating conversation and we'll do this again, maybe in a year when we can see how the primaries are going and have gone, which I think would give us — and how Biden's done and that would give us a lot more information perhaps going into November 2022. So thank you, Sean.

TRENDE: Thank you. I'd love to do it.

KRISTOL: Great. And thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]