

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

JAMES CARVILLE II CONVERSATION

Taped: January 9, 2023

Bill Kristol: Hi, I am Bill Kristol, welcome back to *Conversations*. I'm very pleased to be joined, again—we had our first conversation in the spring of 2021, which stands up very well I might add—joined by James Carville. My friend, I think we first met when James was running the Clinton campaign in '92 and crushing us who were in the first Bush White House. But I'm letting those bygones be bygones, three decades later I can get over that. And James, thanks for joining me today.

James Carville: Thank you, Bill. Good for you.

KRISTOL: And James is really, I think, apart from running campaigns all over the place, is a very shrewd analyst and an honest analyst of American politics. And so I really look forward to finding out from you what the situation is, what the balance of power of the country is, and then we can talk about each party, what you expect from the Republicans, what you expect and wish for from the Democrats. So, state of play: November election, we're now two months past that. It's January 9th as we speak, just past the speaker election. What's the balance of power, the balance of forces in American politics?

CARVILLE: Well, the Democrats do control the White House and the Senate, and of course narrowly lost the House. I think if Biden didn't do anything else in his last two years he would be successful by what he got done in his first two. So I think everybody would breathe a sigh of relief if we just got through the debt ceiling and closing the government down. And if that happened, I think people would say, "Okay, I'll take that."

I'm not sure that's going to happen that easily, but let me put it this way, it could have been a lot worse. And remember they're getting ready to pick up another seat because at Virginia there's a special for deceased member in Virginia, that's a Democratic district. And if George Santos doesn't hold up, the Democrats would probably win that seat if they re-ran it. So there's some chance that the majority shrinks even more.

KRISTOL: Right. But in terms of the election, 2020 and 2022 together, it feels like we dodged a bullet. On the other hand, the country's evenly divided, right?

CARVILLE: Yeah. I call them micro elections. We won the presidency in 2020, we did not do that well in the House and in other places. In 2022, you know who really won? I'm being honest here, I'm not saying this... But who really won the 2022 election, I say "won," who really staved off a disaster were the people I'm speaking to right now.

Why do I say that? I say that because Democratic base turnout was not very good. They won't tell you this on MSNBC, but it was the lowest in Georgia, the black share, the black percent of the vote in Georgia was the lowest it had been since 2006. It should be 20.5%, in North Carolina it was 17%. It was really, you got to check with Charlie

Sykes, but they really underperformed turnout even in Milwaukee. And there were more Republicans than Democrats that actually voted.

If you were looking at the makeup of the electorate, you would say, “The Democrats, they’re going to get beat bad.” And that didn’t happen. Why? Because about 7% to 8% of Republicans voted Democratic. 2% of Democrats voted Republican. And independents broke pretty decently for Democrats at the end of the election, which never happens to the incumbent party. I say never, I can’t remember, but if it does it’s a very rare event.

And that was a lot of people saying, “I don’t know what I am. I know I’m not a Democrat, but I can’t take this anymore. I’m just going to vote Democratic for now.” And I think that was the margin that kept us in. We won in places like Pennsylvania and Arizona and Georgia. But I think that kept the House losses to something pretty disappointing for the Republican side. And I’m pretty sure the data backs me up on this.

KRISTOL: Yeah. That’s consistent with what I’ve seen too. And we were involved a little bit in persuading hopefully some of those independents and weak Republicans, so to speak, to vote Democratic at least this once. But when you step back and say, “What’s the division of power in the country?” It’s really pretty close to 50/50 going forward. If you think about 2024, I mean, Georgia, Arizona, really in Nevada, even on a knife’s edge, maybe Michigan, Pennsylvania a little better, but Wisconsin, Ron Johnson won. I mean, I am struck that-

CARVILLE: The Democrats picked the only single person in Wisconsin that couldn’t beat Ron Johnson. I mean, really, that was an effort to come up with the one guy that couldn’t beat him.

KRISTOL: I guess we defeated the worst election deniers, the craziest conspiracy theorists, which is true, I think, though Arizona was awfully close. But going forward, what do you think the odds, if you just had to say 2024 presidential odds, Democrat, Republican, what do you think, 50/50? A little better than that for Democrats?

CARVILLE: What did Yogi Berra say? “Predictions are very hard to make, especially about the future.” Look, first of all, maybe not the short-term, but the immediate-term and long-term prospectus for the Democratic Party is quite good. I mean, the young people voted in ‘18, they voted in ‘20, they voted in 2022. I mean, didn’t vote as much as older people, but as a share of electorate it was pretty darn good. That’s probably another underappreciated story about holding the losses to a small extent in 2022.

And it is just the fact of life, that they’re going to lose some of their old people and young people are going to keep coming up through the system. That’s the inevitability of life and inevitability of American politics. So much of it depends, obviously if Biden runs, the Democrats are going to renominate him because Biden is well liked among Democrats and Democrats think that Biden’s done a good job. But he’s got to consider the age issue, because everybody else considers it. I’m 78, I’m like, “Do I think I could do this job seven years from now?” Couldn’t do it, couldn’t have done it seven years ago.

And it’s something that he’s going to have to deal with. And it’s not a gotcha question. It’s not a failure to focus on the real issues and talk about jobs and healthcare or whatever it is. And that’s got to play into his decision. So now, on the Republican side,

first of all, I said, I think it was our morning joke that Trump is a “gone pecan,” that’s the slang down here for he’s done. You’d be surprised the pushback that I got from non-Trumpites. “Oh, you can’t say that, James.” And of course they mastered something where they had him call the House floor to try to get two votes, that’s about what he’s down to. Matt Rosendale wouldn’t even take his call.

And he is done. After all this obsession of all these years of him occupying the front part of your mind, when you think about it, you just wonder how fast it’s going to be before he goes to jail. He’s not going to be the Republican nominee at all. We saw what the post-Trump Republican Party looks like. Just go back and look at that speaker’s race. This is not like, “Oh, thank God, Brent Scowcroft has walked back through the door and everything is going to be just like it was before.” No, it’s not. That’s not going to happen.

And my Democratic friends and press friends are in a panic. I said, “Don’t worry, you’ll probably get something crazy.” Because Trump was good for business. He kept everybody on cable TV, everybody had a column they could write, everybody could start an organization. And there’s a lot of interest in keeping Trump around, but I don’t think the voters want him around much more. And I think, increasingly, Republican voters would like to have somebody new and younger.

KRISTOL: So you’ve really cut to the chase, I was going to spend a little longer on the balance of power between the two parties and all this. But of course so much, as you so well know having been with Bill Clinton in ‘92, is candidate dependent and presidential race dependent. Let’s just cut right to that in each case, let’s begin with the Republicans, then I really want to spend a little more time on the Democrats.

Okay, the obvious counterargument to you is, Trump’s been counted out before, he’s still kind of close to even in the polls with DeSantis. He’ll get indicted, but he won’t be convicted before, probably, election day or nominating day in ‘24. He still is a talented demagogue. I mean, why are you so confident he’s done?

CARVILLE: Well, really in the polls I’ve seen, he’s not even with DeSantis. DeSantis is pretty much ahead of him. And when you’re the former president and you see that he’s at CPAC, you see that he got like 54%. Well you get 54% at CPAC, that’s not a good sign. And just if you ask Republicans, I hope Donald Trump runs aside from somebody else because somebody else can get 62%.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

CARVILLE: Now, the danger, I have to acknowledge that there is a path that he could wreak havoc, and it is this. In the Democratic Party, our primaries are mostly proportional. So if you file 35%, 32%, 33%, then you end up with 35% and another guy gets 32%, 33%. The Republicans are mostly winner-take-all. So if you win 35%, 33%, 32%, you end up with 35%, all right? You get the whole ball of wax, you get 100%.

So would a candidate with a deep, loyal, consistent base cause a lot of damage in a Republican nominating process? The answer is yes. But that’s the only way, the only path that he would have. And that assumes that not a lot more is coming. And another thing that for the Republicans, even the far-right people, electability is going to be a big fucking issue. DeSantis can say in a debate, “You can renominate Trump. You lost in

‘18, you lost in 2020, you lost in 2022. I don’t know about you, but I’m tired of losing.’”
The speech writes itself, alright?

KRISTOL: Right, right.

CARVILLE: It just writes itself, you don’t have to think to write that speech. And I just don’t see him being a big voice. And that Olivia Nuzzi piece in *New York Magazine*, if you haven’t read it, you’re not a good citizen. And it was well-written, and it sure sounded true the whole way in the portrait that it printed. I did not, because I’m incapable of it, but if I were a better human being I’d have felt sorry for Donald Trump.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that’s an interesting thought. Does he blow things up on his way out though? Does he gracefully endorse whoever the Republican nominee is and tell his people to vote for them?

CARVILLE: If he thought it would hurt the Republicans, he would. He’s not like Republican like he used to be. Because he doesn’t want, “Well, the Republican Party finally won an election after failing in 2018, 2020 and 2022. Under the leadership of former South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley, the Republicans have once again captured the presidency.” He don’t want that at all. Joe Biden is reelected, and the Republicans didn’t do well, and one of the problems people point to is they didn’t use Donald Trump enough. He wants that. That’s what he wants. You can’t look at him like a normal politician because he’s anything but a normal politician. It’s all revenge, it’s all grievance, it’s all, “I’ll get them back, how dare they?”

KRISTOL: So he is a problem for the Republicans, because either he wins the nomination and he is probably a weaker candidate than the others, or he loses the nomination and isn’t a good team player. And I don’t know how many people follow him in not being a good team player. It’s such a polarized electorate maybe they all end up voting for DeSantis or Haley or Tim Scott or whatever anyway. But he could presumably cause some trouble on the way down, right?

CARVILLE: He could, but more likely his position continues to deteriorate. And when they indict him, so much of it is going to depend on the clarity of the charges and what they are. But that’s not going to help. I was just saying, it’s is not going to be like El Chapo where people take the streets and start shooting up people, that’s not going to happen again, I don’t think. I guess you have to acknowledge that he could continue to be a serious menace to Republicans, but my guess is that his power is ebbing by the day, and my guess is it’ll continue in that trajectory.

KRISTOL: Interesting, yeah.

CARVILLE: But he still has a lot of support that they have to pay attention to. But let’s see, I’m skeptical he can keep it up.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that’s so interesting. And presumably they can address some of the same issues, the same culture war stuff and all this. So, well you’re good at this. So handicap the Republican leading candidates, which ones are overestimated, underestimated? Any surprises out there? How much of a favorite is DeSantis?

CARVILLE: Right. I’d say DeSantis would be slightly overestimated. Underestimated I’d say Brian Kemp.

KRISTOL: Interesting.

CARVILLE: Now, Cruz, Cotton, Josh Hawley, maybe. DeSantis, he's out in front for a long time. And you know in politics, the longer that you're hanging out there, people start to smell odors. And trust me, the Cruz, Holly, Cotton tripartite pack. They don't like DeSantis. Who else can't stand DeSantis is Roger Stone. And the name that you are going to hear in the coming months is the name of Susie Wiles. Why are you going to hear the name of Susie Wiles? She was DeSantis' top person, who's the most proficient... Her dad was a... God, he was a big sports guy. I can't think of it right now. And Mrs. DeSantis fired her and she went to work for Trump.

And Ms. Wiles knows a lot. So let's just keep our eye on her because... And the way that Democrats play, that's nothing. The way that Roger Stone plays? [chuckles] And there's a lot of people that don't wish DeSantis well and a lot of them are just throwing banana peels on the ground and waiting for him to step on one. That's what I think is DeSantis' problem.

And he's, unlike a Bill Clinton or even a George W. Bush, he's not a people person, and it's well-documented. And that counts in politics, particularly if you're going to be out there for a long time and you have a lot of party leaders and things that you need for these primaries.

That's a skill that he does not possess. You don't have to be a hell of a fellow, a good old boy, to be effective at governance, but it does help. And he's no such thing.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's interesting. And I've heard that also about him, and it will be interesting as... Yeah, he hasn't really been tested yet in the sense of having talented operatives on his side trying to undercut him, the Stones, and so forth.

So Kemp, it's interesting. He's been a very successful and popular Governor of Florida, re-elected... of Georgia, re-elected easily. While having stood up to Trump in 2020, do you think the party would be willing to go to someone who really stood up to Trump? Or is there an in-between path for the Nikki Haleys, Glen Youngkins, kind of?

Yeah, I think it would certainly give him... He would be a little different in that sense. And he's got a pretty damn good story to tell in terms of Georgia and his conservative values and everything. I'm not saying that I think he's going to be a nominee, but if you're asking for underprice, I'm going to win on an eight-to-one horse, okay, I'll take this one at eight to one. Alright? That's what it is. And he's very presentable. I don't know if that's a Southern word. I'm sure it's got some negative... Some college campus doesn't like it, but he makes a good impression. He takes a good shower.

KRISTOL: Yeah. Any of the others that strike you, particularly Tim Scott and Nikki Haley, Chris Christie, I don't know governors, other governors?

CARVILLE: Well, Chris Christie, I like Governor Christie, as you know I've done events with him and he's very personable and everything. They're not going to nominate him. It's not going to happen.

Haley's pretty gifted. Republicans love right-wing blacks. You saw the guy in Florida they put up for speaker. Somehow or another they think that this...Having said that, I

don't know, it's hard for me to see Tim Scott nudging in there, but I certainly wouldn't take him out of... I wouldn't say there's no way he'd be top-tier.

And some people that run for president, and come on, they don't care. Like John Bolton actually announced for president in 2024 on the BBC. So we're not going to ask about John Bolton because we just both kind of shaken it up. He's not going to be the nominee and if you have that level of candidate of Dennis Kucinich, people like that. But Tim Scott is definitely not in that category at all. He's somewhere at the bottom of the top tier.

KRISTOL: My governor here in Virginia, Glenn Youngkin, are you impressed by his political talent or just too early to tell or...

CARVILLE: Yeah, so far so good, I would say. But the Republicans cannot win without... What keeps them alive is this high turnout of non-traditional voters. All right? And they have a particular allegiance to Trump and they have a particular allegiance to not just MAGA policies, but MAGA personality on the lips, in-your-face kind of thing. And so far, from what I can see, Youngkin has navigated that pretty good in Virginia. He would definitely... You would not throw him out. You wouldn't say that guy doesn't have a chance. You would keep him. When he announces it'll get covered and people will take him seriously.

But it's a long way from that to getting people who haven't traditionally voted out to vote. That's what Trump has done for the Republicans. Now conversely, and I can't say this enough, we've gone through three cycles and all three have had better than traditional youth share. In other words, in three cycles, the 18 to 35, they've made up a bigger share of the electorate than they normally do.

They keep getting increasingly democratic. And the Republicans, that side, they'll go through that phrase "if you're young and you're conservative, you don't have a heart. If you're old and you're liberal, you don't have a brain." But people think that's actually true. It's actually not true.

The political science, it's just absolute. Once you vote two times for a political party, that's it, you're done. There's been so much research on that. And that's-

KRISTOL: You're done in the sense that that's the party you stick with.

CARVILLE: That's the party you're going to vote for.

KRISTOL: A huge percentage of the time, yeah.

CARVILLE: If you voted for somebody when you were 22 and you voted again for that party when you're 26, at 66 you're going to be voting for the same party. "Oh, I don't tell... I know my uncle, my nephew." "Well, okay, your nephew."

But that's a studied, settled thing in political science. It's not that hard to figure out. And you're starting to see some of the commentators are starting to figure this out. And so I think if the Democrats can have a good 2024, which is possible, they'll do even better in '28.

KRISTOL: I'm going to come back to the Democrats in a second, but just one last word on the Republican presidential side of things. I suppose if Trump really fades and maybe doesn't run, there is room for one or two real Trump candidates, literally, like Donald Jr. or Trumpy candidates like, I don't know, Kari Lake or Marjorie Taylor Greene or Tucker Carlson. Someone will take that lane, right, but presumably-

CARVILLE: Yeah. And will cause damage. And it all depends. That candidate, to do well, and this is imminently possible, let's just say Tucker, who we both know well, I could see him getting those non-traditional rural, small town voters out who don't normally vote, voting in these primaries. And he would offer them something in a creative and forceful way. But yes, Trumpism... But Kathy Barnette, I don't know if you remember her. She was the black Republican that ran as the Trumpy candidate in the Pennsylvania Senate primary.

KRISTOL: Right, who came from nowhere and ended up pretty close.

CARVILLE: She had the smartest analysis that I've ever heard. She said, "You've got to understand, MAGA was here before Trump. He came in and did what we wanted him to do and we voted for him." And somebody pointed out, yeah, he went to North Alabama and told people to get vaccinated. They booed him off the stage.

Trump has rented MAGA. All right? This nativism, and God knows what else I would call it, existed before him. He certainly articulated it, but he only did that because he did what they wanted him to do. If he tried to do something they didn't want to do, they didn't pay attention to it.

And it's a big part of the Republican Party and it can get non-traditional voters to vote, which is the thing that the Republicans need. And if it's Glenn Youngkin, I don't know that Glenn Youngkin has the political skill, frankly, I don't know if very many people do, to keep the Northern Virginia suburbs and Henrico and Chesterfield in check to acceptable losses by getting sky high turnout in Rockingham and Shenandoah. You know what I'm saying. That's a pretty delicate feat. It would take someone very skilled to pull off in a presidential race.

KRISTOL: I think when we last spoke in this conversation in April of 2021, it was unclear how much election denialism would remain strong in the Republican Party. Unclear how... Well, just what you've been talking about, how strong Trumpism really was.

He obviously was uniquely able to amplify it and extend it beyond the Pat Buchanan, Ron Paul level. But are you struck today... I guess I am. Well, let's just talk about the party for a minute as opposed to the candidates.

The degree to which the party has moved more in that direction, not less, despite everything, don't you think? The actual real existing Republican Party in the Senate, in the House and the governorships, is more Trumpy, or Trumpist, than it was before the election and certainly than it was three or six, five years ago, than not.

The ones who resisted are gone mostly, and the new ones are not on the Glenn Youngkin side even. They're on the, much more as we saw on the House speaker race, it's not a bunch of old people who were the MAGA people, it's the younger, newer elected Republicans.

CARVILLE: Yeah, it's true. How could you come up with anything worse than Blake Masters, I have no idea. All right? But the younger voters are not with them.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's interesting.

CARVILLE: The election deniers are overwhelmingly older, and of course, they dig in because that's... If I talk to someone in rural Georgia, you really don't think they're cheating in Atlanta? "Come on, James. It just stuff [inaudible 00:28:15], how many votes you need that's how many votes you get."

If I'm in downstate Illinois, you think that stuff that you get out of Cook County is any good? The idea that you say... No, actually people are studying this and there's hardly any fraud at all, that don't even penetrate. All right?

It just became part of the myth of political America that there's widespread cheating in urban America. And I'm sure it was true to some extent. I doubt if it's .. I think it's 1% true, 2%, but that's about it. But it's so ingrained that the only way somebody is going to lose this is that they pass to another world, but they're not going to change their mind.

KRISTOL: Yeah, it's so interesting. As you say, the voters are the older voters. The people who the opportunistic, younger politicians who've seen a chance to rise very fast, Elise Stefanik and Marjorie Taylor Greene.

And we can make fun of Marjorie Taylor Green, but she's much more powerful than she would be if she had just been an old-fashioned, normal, dutiful Republican working on her committees.

Those people really took advantage of it. And I guess I'm just struck how extreme... I think people are underestimating a little what the Republican Party is going to look like over the next two years. And maybe I'm wrong, but you think the House Republicans could hurt going into '24? Neutral?

CARVILLE: Like anybody else, I'll wait to see a poll taken about maybe this weekend, later this week on favorability of the parties. Do I think that this hurt them? It couldn't have helped.

And I don't know, I'm not a Republican, but if the Democrats did that I'd be under the covers. I couldn't look at television. It'd be too much to contemplate. I think some of this is going to seep through, I really do.

KRISTOL: Yeah. Interesting. Well, so it'll be... So that's the Republican side, I guess. Democrats, you've mentioned President Biden, but, well, let's just talk about it from the terms of the party as a whole. But what about... Do you think, really... I'm just... Predictions, as you said, are difficult. Will Joe Biden run? Or if he does run, I suppose he'll be the nominee. So it's really just a question of whether he'll run in '24.

CARVILLE: Well, right now it's pretty clear that he intends to run, but you can always change your mind. And I think the age issue is going to be huge. And I'll point out that Nancy Pelosi, Steny Hoyer, Jim Clyburn, all resigned their posts. All of them are younger than Biden would be at the end of his second term, probably younger than mid-second term.

And I'd say, I just got the latest census numbers on my computer, and as of this moment there are 333,361,411 people that live in the United States. Could we please find somebody under 75 to be our president? Just for the fun of it? Okay, try that. You've done enough of these to know that some [inaudible 00:31:45] are just going to work. That's the one that I know is going to work every time.

KRISTOL: And don't you think... I think President Biden's people... I've made the case that he shouldn't run again. He should be a very successful one-term president, which will have made a great contribution to the country, and so forth. And they said, "Well, he's the only one who could beat Trump," or has beaten Trump, I suppose. He made a great contribution to the country and so forth, and then you said, "Well, he's the only one who could beat Trump," or has beaten Trump, I suppose. If Trump fades, as you're saying you think he is, doesn't that lessen the case for Biden? If you have a younger Republican running against Biden, then that argument you just made, that comment you just made, makes a bit of a difference, no?

CARVILLE: I guess what I would do, I would not ... Why is he the only Democrat that could Trump? I have no idea.

KRISTOL: Well, that too. I agree with that too, incidentally.

CARVILLE: He might have been the only Democrat that could beat Trump in 2020, because people were not known, and frankly, most of them were not skillful and they had, what I think is an idiotic strategy when they were chasing Bernie's left tail all around. Elizabeth was a viable candidate until she came out for Medicare for All. Now, it's not that Iowa Democrats don't like Medicare for all. It's that they think it's a losing issue. Win-ability is a much bigger issue now than when you and I were actually doing politics, but let's look at some of the Democratic candidates.

Harris, she's not going to chase anybody off, but she's a sitting vice president. She'd obviously be a top tier candidate, as would Gavin Newsom. He might not culturally be your cup of tea, but people don't realize this: the California economy is one of the best in the country. Look at their GDP growth. Jay Inslee, Jared Polis, Amy Klobuchar. I'll give you one that I would look at real close: JB Pritzker. Gretchen Whitmer, Big Gretch, probably the most successful democratic state anywhere in the country. She has a hell of a story to tell.

KRISTOL: On this Biden-beating-Trump thing, I've always thought that Whitmer, Shapiro in Pennsylvania too, are a good response, because fine, he beat Trump. That's great. He beat Trump in Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, but Whitmer beat her Trumpy opponent in Michigan by a much bigger margin than Biden did.

CARVILLE: Absolutely.

KRISTOL: Shapiro in Pennsylvania. The idea that Whitmer and Shapiro can't win a national election, I just think empirically they just won by big margins in the classic swing states, right?

CARVILLE: Absolutely. I'll give you a couple other names. Roy Cooper.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

CARVILLE: Mitch Landrieu. He's former Lieutenant Governor, was mayor, president of US Conference of Mayors and in the Biden cabinet. By the way, the single most important voting bloc in determining a Democratic President, by far, not close, African Americans, particularly in the South. Do you know how much street cred Mitch has in a South Carolina church? I can tell you. A lot.

KRISTOL: Interesting.

CARVILLE: Warnock is skilled enough. My point is that they want you to believe that without Biden, there's nothing underneath. The fact is, there's as much as I've seen any party have at any given time, talent. If all of these people ran, which I would encourage every one of them to do, people look and they go, "You know what? These people can string a sentence together." I think it would be good for the party. I just think that it's me being 78. People say, "Why don't you go run this campaign?" The only thing I can run in my life is my mouth. Go get somebody else.

KRISTOL: I'm with you on that too, for me, but I'm also with you on the quality of the Democratic bench and the case for letting them run. Just as there was a case for letting Nancy Pelosi, who's been a fantastic speaker and very skilled speaker, step down for Hakeem Jeffries. I think that's going to end up working out fine for the Democrats. The sophisticated answer to what I've been saying and what you just said very well is, that's very nice for you to say in theory, but in practice we saw what 2019, 2020 looked like. You just said it was kind of a ridiculous ... the debates were not great. Everyone ran to the left? Why won't that just happen again?

CARVILLE: I don't think it will, for several reasons. One is, they saw what happened in 2020 and somebody is going to stand up in a meeting and say, "Just so you know, do we really want to be Elizabeth Warren here?" Again, it wasn't that people in Iowa disliked the concept of Medicare for All. They were just convinced it was a general election loser. Some of them will. Remember Alan Cranston? He ran in 1984 or something like that? Somebody's going to say, "Look, if we get the identity crowd, we can get ... that'll poll out at 27% somewhere." Yes, but that space will be occupied. I just don't think it's going to be occupied by a lot of candidates, and I don't think it's going to be occupied by the winning candidate, if there's an open primary. I don't think that Harris's status as a vice president or a woman of color is going to be determinative at all. Certainly, she's going to get a very close listen. People will pay attention to her, but she's got a bigger case here, that she has not made.

KRISTOL: Yeah. That's interesting. Does someone have to say what you've been saying, and I've been saying in my very little way, someone who's an actual elected official have the nerve to say, "with all due respect, Mr. President, you've done a great job. You will go down in history as an important American president, but one term is enough," or can he just come to that on his own? How does it work in practice?

CARVILLE: Look at the Senate map. It pains me to look at it, because from the standpoint of a Democrat, it is off. Everyone in Pennsylvania, Ohio, everywhere that you can think of, Montana-

KRISTOL: West Virginia.

CARVILLE: West Virginia. Every poll is going to say... Ask, "Do you want President Biden to run for re-election?" Every poll is going to come back "No." The way this

might happen is about five vulnerable democratic senators ask for a meeting and say, “Sir, we can run on your accomplishments,” anything like that. Believe you me, everybody that counts knows exactly what this Senate map is. Everybody that counts knows that we got to have a really enthusiastic group to go out and vote, and we got to build on this young thing. You just have 65% of the people in the country that don’t want him to run for reelection.

It’s not something you can change your position on. “I used to be against gay marriage. Now, I’m for gay marriage.” Alright. Okay. Great. You can’t change your age. It’s a fixed number and it doesn’t do anything but go up. It’s not going to get better. If you are these, or you’re Democratic house members, and people come back and they say, “Man, if our presidential performance number went to this, we could pick up these seats.” Again, it’s not that Democrats like Biden. They give great credit for what he’s been able to do with very narrow majorities, but they’re like everybody else. Now, if he runs he’ll win, and he’s got to think about what he wants to do with Harris. When you elect an 82-year-old president, the vice president is pretty god damn relevant at that point. I don’t know, but I do know that all of this is not going away. Sometimes he gets irritated when he gets asked about it. They’re not going to not ask it. I can’t blame them.

KRISTOL: I think your key insight implied here is that President Biden can announce he’s running for reelection. They can set up the committee on February 1st or whatever, or people can announce on his behalf that he intends to run, but that’s not going to stop it either. It doesn’t change, as you said, the age question, and it doesn’t change people saying, “Wait a second, sir...” Both the argument you just made politically, but also I think a serious argument that there’s a ton you can do for the country over these next two years. Probably easier to do it if you’re not a candidate. Foreign policy, Ukraine, Iran, making sure we get past the inflation and Covid. There’s a real agenda here, which would really give you a mark in the history books. Harder to do that if you’re a candidate.

CARVILLE: You’re right. If you look at some of the stuff he’s done, I could argue, I think pretty good, that Ukraine is probably the most successful foreign policy initiative since World War II. You couldn’t ask for exposing your biggest adversary without losing a single person. I can’t imagine that it is not in the real interest of the United States and the West, to not keep this thing going. Biden can take a lot of credit for it, and he can take a lot of credit. Everybody said the Europeans would ... they’re going to be typical. They’ve held together pretty good. It’s been impressive, if you will. Not many presidents get that kind of a foreign policy achievement. Let me tell you, how you know that they’re a little bit uncomfortable. Why did they try to move South Carolina ahead of New Hampshire?

KRISTOL: Yeah. You know the real inside stuff. Tell me about that. I’m curious.

CARVILLE: First of all, South Carolina have already determined who the president was. Clinton lost New Hampshire. Obama lost New Hampshire. Biden lost New Hampshire.

KRISTOL: Biden got crushed in New Hampshire. It was fifth, right? I think.

CARVILLE: Yeah, but they acquired the name of President. There was no reason to change that. There were a lot of reasons not to. First of all, you got two Democratic

senators, two democratic congresspeople, and it's actually a swing state. It's not Vermont.

KRISTOL: South Carolina's not a swing state.

CARVILLE: This is informed speculation. We're going to draw ... somebody's run against us. What happens in New Hampshire, the same thing happened to Lyndon Johnson. Same thing happened. Either [inaudible 00:43:50] and they got to [inaudible 00:43:51] because it's quirky. The other side can come in. It's quirky. We don't need quiriness; we need stability. Let's move to South Carolina. You know and they know that you get a decent candidate and you're going to get a lot of votes in New Hampshire. South Carolina is going to be much more predictable. I think that's a pretty evident sign that they tried to do this, which politically doesn't make any sense. I'm sure that he's ... the black caucus put a lot of pressure on him. The truth of matter is, Southern blacks in particular, are already the dominant force by far, in nominating Democratic presidents. That's why when you look at a potential democratic candidate, ask yourself, "How are they going to do in the Mississippi Delta?" You say, "Well, Gavin Newsom? I'm not too sure." Without that, you're not going anywhere.

KRISTOL: Presumably, that's Buttigieg's challenge. He's otherwise a very talented candidate, I think.

CARVILLE: Very talented, but he had trouble with black voters when he ran in 2020. That's the most key. By the way, they're not particularly left. James Clyburn always said, "The most conservative person I ever knew was my daddy." Shiny new objects do not appeal to them. They like somebody dependable. That's why if he does run, I'd give my friend, Mitch Landrieu, a real shot. That is the most important constituency in the party. New Hampshire is much more volatile. Then once something happens, it cascades on you. It doesn't go in a straight line. Biden's political people are very smart and very experienced, and they saw this coming and they went about it to fix it.

KRISTOL: That's so interesting. That hasn't been commented on that much in the news. They're rewarding their supporters in South Carolina, which is fine, and probably true to some degree. The worrying about the Eugene McCarthy kind of Pat Buchanan phenomenon in New Hampshire, that's a very good point, I think. Putting it together with your earlier point, it's a good reminder. People are treating it as if Biden announces, as I said earlier, on February 1st, or the committees get set up, and that's like all the talk is over. Of course, that's not how it's going to work.

He'll announce, and then there'll be, as you say, polling and stuff will happen. Maybe someone of these people, one of the ones who's wealthy, the Pritzkers or the Newsoms of the world, will decide, "You know what? I might just start talking about considering a race, as much as I love and respect Joe Biden." I do think the dynamic of 2023 on the Democratic presidential side, is underrated. People are used to incumbents who ... Bush, Clinton, or whatever, they run for reelection. They run for reelection, and basically there's not much of a story, Obama, to write about then.

CARVILLE: If J.B. Pritzker said, "James, I'm going to do this and I'm going to give you a million dollars," which he could afford easily, for the best advice you can give him. I'd say, "My advice, Governor, is carry a gold watch around and say, 'This is what President Biden deserves. He has really, really served our party. He has served our nation with distinction for, I don't know, 70, 65 years,'" anything like that. I would just

have ... the gold watch would be my prop. “There you go, Governor Pritzker, I’m giving you this and you don’t even have to pay me a million dollars.”

KRISTOL: That’s good.

CARVILLE: You can find me in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi.

KRISTOL: When Governor Pritzker watches this, the check will be in the mail. Whether one of them has the nerve...I mean, whether one of them has the nerves to do it, but a lot will depend on, as you say, on polling and other things that happen. It’s a long time. Let me close ... This has been very interesting, in so many ways. What about—the Democrats do control the Senate, they have a large representation in the House, and the ability to make some news there too—what would your advice be to Schumer, and to Hakeem Jeffries, in the sense of, what’s the best thing they can do for the party over the next couple of years?

CARVILLE: Well, to Hakeem Jeffries it’s just keep supplying them rope. I mean, an endless supply of rope. What you do is not going to be very much, it’s less important than the stuff that they come up with. In the Senate, you have legislative strategies to focus something home. Kevin McCarthy has said that he wants to, get this, he wants to have used the debt limit to force cuts in Social Security and Medicare. I would put an amendment up and have the Republicans in the Senate vote on that. In every cockamamie idea that they came up with, if I were a Democratic senator, I would offer that as an amendment, because the Republican senator is going to look like they just don’t go along with what the public thinks it’s ... It couldn’t be a worse idea, defaulting on a debt, or shutting the government down, to do the two most unpopular things that you can do in American politics. So that would be certainly part of my strategy.

I’d pass things. I’d go to my pollsters and say, “What are the five most popular things that we could do?” And then do them all, and let the House kill it. People say, “Why vote on this? It’s not going to pass the House.” That’s exactly the reason to vote on it. They don’t want to vote, they don’t want to have a vote on raising the minimum wage. Let’s say 74% popularity.

I’d have my pollsters again, what’s the five most popular things we could do? And I’d go out and do it, and send them over to the House. Let them kill it. Then say, “Ah-ha, we told you.”

People like immigration. You can’t confuse immigration and the border. They don’t like disorder on the border, but they like immigration.

And by the way, this is one tight labor market. There’s only one way that ... There are two things that you can do that would loosen up the labor market. One, is immigration. And two, is daycare. If you had good federally funded daycare ... If I were a McDonald’s franchisee, I would be happy to pay more taxes to support that, because I’d come out way better. You want to increase labor force participation, don’t give mothers a choice between childcare and a job. Ma’am, we got you covered for eight hours a day. That would work brilliantly.

You hear this all the time, particularly from a lot of my conservative business people, “Nobody wants to work in this country anymore, God damn it, James.” There are more people working in the United States right now than any time in history. What are you talking about?

KRISTOL: There are a lot of immigrants who would like to work, that's for sure.

CARVILLE: You are a 28-year-old mother with a 12-year-old and a six-year-old child in Honduras, and you walk to the Mexican border, you're motivated. We got a place for you, lady, come on in. That's a motivated person.

KRISTOL: Do you think the Democrats have been too spooked by that issue? I mean, Biden seems to just have been, at least so far, wary of doing anything, because it'll just get back to the border, and the Republicans will demagogue it.

CARVILLE: There's part of the Democratic Party that doesn't think that we should even have a border, or have border enforcement. You know who else used to declare essentially the same thing? The *Wall Street Journal* editorial page. That's always been... People do not like disorder, plain and clear. They like immigration, they like immigrants. They don't like disorder.

I did Jim McCarthy yesterday, and I said, "You want to blame Joe Biden for something on immigration, I'll give you something. He created too goddamn many jobs." If we wouldn't have a hot job market, we'd have a lot less people. Now ask yourself, do you want to live in a country that people are clamoring to get into, or a country that people are clamoring to get out of? Me, I'm happy I live here and not in Venezuela, I'll be honest with you. I consider it a blessing. If I lived in Venezuela, I would want to live here.

KRISTOL: Right. Right. Absolutely. Final thing, when we talked in April of '21, you were concerned about the identity politics stuff, and spilling over, I think you said, from the Amherst faculty lounge to the Democratic Party, and creating a certain image of the party, partly fairly, partly unfairly. Do you feel like that's receded a bit? Does the party address that? Is it where it was a couple years ago? How worried are you about all that stuff?

CARVILLE: I think it has receded some. There's just not an honorable way for it to recede even more. So when I started this, people were coming up, at the time that we talked in Spring of 2021, I guess it was, and they said, "You say some controversial shit, James." I said, "No, I don't. 85% of the people agree with me." You're not saying anything controversial that 85% agree with what you're saying.

And the truth of the matter is, they didn't never fool me, because I didn't have anything to cancel. What, are they going to cancel me from *The Bulwark*? I don't think so. There's nothing. They can't cancel me from LSU, because I don't work there anymore. I'm un-cancelable. But, yes, I think it's receding, and I think people understand that it's bad politics. I do. I think it reached its zenith some time in 2020, but I think it's receded.

I just don't think anybody's going to come up and say, "We were just wrong with this obsessive focus on language, and we'll stop it." Somebody will embrace that, but they're not going to do very well. The New York Times ... By most accounts, it's generously 15% of the Democratic Party. The numbers of Republicans who believe the Earth is younger than 5,000 years old are significantly higher than the number of Democrats that embrace identity politics language, and by a long shot. But there are some, that is correct. Maybe some of it is uncalled for. I'll tell you a word that I don't

use anymore, but I'll use it now, but I try not to use, is the word "woke." And let me tell you why.

KRISTOL: Yeah, say a word about that.

CARVILLE: The best history says that the word woke was first used by a guy named Lead Belly Ledbetter, who was a talented, innovative jazz musician, who was born in Caddo Parish, right outside of Shreveport. I think he died in a Houston jail. He wrote a song, and it basically said that black people had to be woke when dealing with policemen, which was probably a pretty good idea in 1920s America. As they say in the Marine Corps, you should have situational awareness.

I think the word has a real noble and meaningful history, and, like everything else, some overeducated coastal white person decided that they were going to screw it up for everybody, and they've diminished the real meaning of the word. And what it should mean is just something ... another piece of academic jargon that you can just sling around. So that's why I'm too high on the word "woke" to even use it anymore. I think it's close to a sacrilege.

I just call it the identity left, or the identity academic left, or something like that, and people know what I'm talking about.

KRISTOL: Yeah, they do. And I have a sense too that it's receded a bit, but we'll see. We'll see over the next year or two, that'll be one of the big unknowns.

CARVILLE: It hasn't gotten bigger, that I'm sure of. It's still there, but my real sense is it's receded.

KRISTOL: Even if it is only 15, I'm just struck, this is partly a Republican talking point, and a Fox News success story, that they made lots of people out there think it was a bigger part of the Democratic Party than it ever was. But the Democrats played into it at times too, obviously. So the question is how much they can push back and really-

CARVILLE: Yeah. And Biden has been very helpful on that, because he doesn't even know what woke is. He goes, "What you talking about, pal? Well, you see, sir, I don't understand. Tell me ..." "No, no, no." I mean, he has no idea. The language of the identity left, I mean, you look at Joe Biden and it's just hard to see the word Latinx come out of this mouth.

KRISTOL: Though there could be people in his administration ... But whatever. Yeah, no, no, I agree with that. Yeah. Now the degree to which, just to loop back to what we were talking about, I don't know, I just feel like people are ... The degree to which Biden could really go down a successful and important one-term president, and running for reelection a second term with the age, but with also the other things that happen in second terms, that you and I have seen so many times, the idea that it's in his interest to run for a second term, I find ... The fact that all of his people seem to believe that, I'm a little mystified by that. I just feel like, if you were being honest, just thinking about him, leave aside the country, leave aside the party, leave aside all the other stuff that he should also, and of course does also think about, I am sort of amazed that they all think, "Of course you should run. It's the right thing for him to do." It's like, really? Why is that?

CARVILLE: Yeah. First of all, when you work for a president, everything that they say they're going to do is brilliant. And he has done a good job. I'm always reminded of when de Gaulle said he wasn't going to run for president of France again. And they said, "My God, what's France going to do without you?" He said, "The graveyards are full of indispensable people." There's no such thing ...

Maybe they've talked themselves into believing that they're indispensable to the future of the United States. And you experienced it, we both experienced it, and me in a much better way than you did ... How could we ever have a president that was not a veteran of World War II? Well, things change. How could we ever have a president that's Black? Well, things change. Again, there's nothing inevitable out there.

Like I say, if he runs, he certainly deserves the nomination. He would get my vote. But deep down inside, I hope he gives this thing a lot more thought. I'll leave it at that.

KRISTOL: That's a good judicious note on which to end. I think you've been controversial in your own way, even though you claim not to be controversial, but I trust you won't be canceled because of this conversation. James, thank you really very much for taking this time. It's been very interesting.

CARVILLE: Thank you, Bill. And as I pointed out, the people that support your group are actually the people that did play probably the biggest part in winning this election. It just can't be denied. And I hope that the Democrats make people like that comfortable in our coalition. You're never going to be comfortable with Democrats, because we're coalition, and our coalition partners, some of them you like more than others. But that's the nature of a party that is a coalition, which I think that we need more coalitions in this country. I don't think it's a bad word at all, I think it's a good word. So, for now at least, welcome to the coalition.

KRISTOL: Thank you. And it's good to be part of it, honestly. Thank you, James. And thank you all for joining us on *Conversations*.

CARVILLE: Thank you.