

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Ayres Conversation

Taped: August 24, 2023

BILL KRISTOL:

Hi, I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome back to conversations. I'm very pleased to be joined again, for the third time this year actually, by Whit Ayres. The first two conversations on the state of the Republican Party, and the presidential race in general, were so informative, honestly, and I think stand up so well, that it seemed important to do another one here on, what is it, August 24th? Whit is the president of North Star Opinion Research, I think it's called.

WHIT AYRES:

That's right.

KRISTOL:

A very well-regarded polling and strategy firm, and himself been involved in elections at every level, including presidential elections, debate prep, which is relevant, I suppose, to last night's debate, and is widely considered one of our most thoughtful and far-seeing analysts of current politics, and so Whit, thanks for joining me again.

AYRES:

Bill, great to be with you again.

KRISTOL:

So, we're talking on, as I said, I think on August 24th. We spoke in November, and you correctly said, you know, you thought there was a chance that Trump would pay some price for having been identified with election denial, which didn't do too well in November '22, and that someone, probably DeSantis, could make a better run at him, which he did. But then that faded. When we spoke last in mid-July, DeSantis was fading, but it was unclear how far he was going to fade, and Trump was at around 50% in the polling, and I looked just now, and he's now around 52%, so not much has changed on the Trump side.

DeSantis has faded some. Ramaswamy has showed up, but a lot has happened, because we've had, what, the January... The DC indictment for January 6th by Jack Smith, the Georgia indictment, and then the debate last night, so I don't know. Maybe these things will have some effect or other things in the future will have some effect, but sort of striking that for now, that the race seems not that unlike when we spoke, but maybe that's itself a story. So explain. Let's begin with Trump, I guess, the guy who wasn't on stage last night, but obviously the dominant figure in the race now. How dominant is he? Why haven't things changed, if they haven't? Are there changes lurking out there that might alter the dynamics of the race?

AYRES:

Bill, Donald Trump is the quasi-incumbent in the Republican Party, and it's similar to Joe Biden and the Democratic Party, as the incumbent. There are not a lot of people who want to run against him in the Democratic Party. At least there are some people of real substance running against Trump in the Republican party. But it's very difficult to run against a quasi-incumbent. He has a lead now. He's likely to continue to have a lead, at least until people start voting next year. So, I don't know if it'll change then, but there's a history of polls following the votes of early states, and polling changing as a result of people actually voting. But I think it's unrealistic to expect Donald Trump to change a whole lot over the course of the next six months.

I do think there's one really important date this month, and it's not last night's first debate. It's not today, when Donald Trump will surrender to the authorities in Georgia. It's Monday, August 28th. That's the day where Judge Chutkan will set the date for the January 6th trial. The order of these trials is really important. We saw that with the indictments. The first indictment was weak as dishwater. It was from Alvin Bragg, using a misdemeanor in New York, linking it through an unproven legal theory to a felony at the federal level to try to raise it to a felony. This charge brought by a man who when he was running for prosecutor, boasted that he had sued the Trump administration more than 100 times. If I were designing a case that would have been easy for Republicans to dismiss as a partisan witch hunt, I would design exactly the case that Alvin Bragg brought.

That made it a lot easier, I think, for Republicans to dismiss subsequent indictments as another partisan witch hunt. The indictment brought by Jack Smith in the classified documents case is strong as battery acid. They've got Donald Trump on tape, basically admitting to the charges in the filing. But if that one had come first, maybe attitudes would have been a little different, but it didn't. So I think the first trial is really important. The government has asked for the trial to start January 2nd. The Trump forces have asked for it to be postponed, not until next year, not until the year after that, but for the year after that, in April of 2026. They might as well just say, "Well, let's just do it in 2029, after Donald Trump is no longer president if he gets elected." Judge Chutkan has not shown a whole lot of deference to Trump forces thus far, and if she sets the trial date for January 2nd, as she might, then I think it becomes a major, major event in the presidential race. That would allow a trial, if it lasts four to six weeks, to finish before Super Tuesday, before the vast majority of Republican primary voters vote. If Donald Trump gets acquitted, as he might, then the nomination hits. I don't know any way you'd stop it. But if he gets convicted of a serious felony charge, I don't know how people would react to that, because we've never had remotely close to a similar situation. But I'd have to think that a serious felony charge, maybe coupled with some prison time, would at least cause some people to rethink their support for the former president.

So, all these people who want to jump to a conclusion about what's certain to happen next summer, I think need to take a breath and wait and see about some of these events that may very well happen before next summer, to see if indeed, Donald Trump is the nominee.

KRISTOL:

Yeah, that's interesting, and I suppose there are other... I don't know. Curious how much there's a binary sort of situation of an actual trial, with actual testimony by Mike Pence, and Mark Meadows, and everyone about what Trump said on January 4th, and 5th, and 6th. There's nothing if things get delayed, and maybe there's literally just a lot of legal maneuvering before Super Tuesday, let's say, and no actual visible trial in that sense.

There's sort of an in-between situation, I suppose, which we see a little bit hints of in Georgia, where maybe some people go to trial faster, and there's testimony that implicates Trump, but maybe isn't literally about Trump... You know, Trump isn't the actual, necessarily. He might get... His trial might not come first, but I think others have asked for their trial to be sped up and so forth. I mean, generally, do you think that it has to be sort of DC, January 2nd, the full bore January 6th trial, or could the legal developments, even if they're sort of less clearcut, more incremental in a sense, whether in Florida with Mar-a-Lago or in Georgia, could also make some more difference than they have so far?

AYRES:

The January 6th trial, the way Jack Smith has constructed it, is relatively simple compared to Georgia. There's one defendant and one defendant only, and that's Donald Trump. There are four charges, not multiple charges, so you could make a case that that is a cleaner, simpler case. The Georgia case is a giant, sprawling RICO case, with some 19 defendants, and a multitude of charges. That could go on for years.

KRISTOL:

But it sounds like you don't think the individual elements that might come out, as they have come out, about Mar-a-Lago, and the classified documents, and Trump said this, and waved the document around... It sounds like you don't think that those kind of individual elements end up making much of a difference, or they haven't so far, I guess, right? And that you need the real trial in one place, at one time, in the nation's capital kind of thing.

AYRES:

With a lot of very damaging testimony brought out against the former president. No, I think you're going to have to have a real event, and that real event is a trial, and testimony, and a verdict. Even that might not change people's minds on the Republican side, as we know, but I think it has the greater potential to change minds than almost anything else that's likely to happen.

KRISTOL:

Yeah, and the testimony would be from people who work with him, and-

AYRES:

Well, sure.

KRISTOL:

... supported him twice, and so forth.

AYRES:

Yeah, and who knows what Mark Meadows is going to do. I mean, he has been remarkably absent in all of these charges. It does make you wonder if he's not cooperating with the government.

KRISTOL:

Yeah. That will be interesting, if we find out fast enough to affect the 2024 primary or general election, I suppose is a huge, as you say, a huge question. I think your point about him being an incumbent is just so important. You made it, I think, quickly in the past, but maybe dwell on it for a second. I mean, it's a, a lot of the coverage of the race does have, understandably I guess, the [inaudible 00:10:06] What's, it open seat? I mean, the Democrats have the presidency, and we know how we cover the primary in the out party, and it's Republicans in 2012 or 2016, or it's the Democrats in 2008, and we all... You know, "This person's surging, and this person does well at this debate, and this person raises a lot of money," but it is helpful, I think, to think of Trump as the defacto incumbent. I mean this is the only time, what in a century, that an ex-president is running for the presidency. He's won the Republican nomination twice in a row. 70-million-plus Republicans have voted for him, I guess 60 the first time, 70-plus the second time, for president, you know?

AYRES:

Yep.

KRISTOL:

It's such a massive advantage. I was thinking about this last night. Apart from the relatively few Republicans that voted for Chris Christie in Iowa and New Hampshire, and then he got out in 2016, no Republican outside of the states in which those people have been run for governor or senator has ever voted for any of these other people, except for Pence actually. We should probably get back to that. 'Cause he has a little bit of that advantage maybe, for that reason.

But Trump has such a huge advantage, to be sort of the twice-nominated, once-successful president, the only successful Republican candidate since 2004. I think sort of the conventional wisdom underestimates that side of it a little bit. It's not... Yes, he is somewhat cult-like, and he has some mystical hold on the party, and he's changed the party. We'll come back to that, but just that fact alone, it's a little like... I guess Nixon in '68, I was thinking is, in a way, the closest to it, right? A former vice president for two terms. Then they lose in '64 with Goldwater. Nixon has been ruled out, because he ran a terrible campaign in California in '62 and lost the governorship. At the end of the day, everyone looks up and says, "You know what? Nixon is in sync with the party, and in a tumultuous time can govern, and we like him as Republicans," and so he gets nominated.

And I suppose... Anyway, and final point about the Trump incumbency is he's also managed to pull off the pretty successful trick of being the de facto incumbent and the outsider, which is good, which is what you want, right? To do, in a way, if you're in a... when people are in a mood of, "We want change," but he's sort of not the favorite of the establishment. He likes to remind people of that, that he's running against the establishment, but he's also, if you're a Republican who's like, "Jeez, are these other guys up to doing it well?" Trump did the job, you know? Trump, he got the economy fixed, whatever, right? I'm struck when you listen to Trump voters, how much they

combine a certain kind of, “We want to kick everything over, and we’re confident that Trump knows what he’s doing,” which usually don’t go together, right? So...

AYRES:

Yep, yep, and your point about Nixon is well taken, but he was a former vice president, not a former two-time nominee and former president.

KRISTOL:

Yeah, no, that’s why it’s so unusual, the current situation, to say the least. One more word on Trump and then we should get to the debate. I mean, the rest of the field, so to speak. I don’t know how much you watched of Trump and Tucker Carlson last night, but Trump, I think, also is underestimated kind of, as a demagogue. That is, he’s pretty smart about what he’s demagogic about, and sometimes, when he lets up on it a little bit and doesn’t go overboard, and can be semi... Reassuring is probably too strong, but non-scary in a way, if you don’t want to be scared about Trump, you know? That he’s going to take over and get the economy going again, and stop the politicization of the Justice Department, but he can put some of the crazy stuff on a back-burner when he has to, I think.

AYRES:

Yep, yep. Well, he did, in the three weeks leading up to the 2016 election, which is one reason why he was able to pull it off.

KRISTOL:

Yeah, that’s interesting. And even 2020, don’t you think? There was a little bit of a kind of default of semi-normalcy in such a crazy situation, I suppose, with COVID and all that, but... Yeah, I don’t know. But yeah, no, I think he has such big advantages. Well, so there’s the Jack Smith wildcard. Little hard to see these other candidates actually just beating Trump, but someone would have to beat him if it’s not going to be Trump, let’s he withdraws if something happens to him. So let’s just go through the field and tell me what you make of it and what parts of the Republican electorate they’re appealing to and who seems to be doing better and who seems to be doing worse. What order should we go in? I guess from the anti-Trump side to the in-between side to the fighting for Trump’s own voter side, or-

AYRES:

Okay. Well, you and I have talked about the Never Trump, Always Trump, “Maybe Trump” division in the party before, so let’s think about it that way. Last night, Chris Christie and Asa Hutchison were reaching out to the Never Trump portion of the party. Christie was not as strong last night as he has been in some media interviews, but he did make his point directly and got booed for it. The Never Trump portion of the party is the smallest portion, but it’s still there and it’s intense. It’s some 10 to 15% of the party nationally. And here’s the key point, the Never Trump portion of the party is larger in New Hampshire than it is nationally, maybe substantially larger. And Chris Christie has the potential to appeal to that group and do very well in New Hampshire, especially if Governor Sununu will endorse him and campaign with him. So he’s not trying to get the votes of the vast majority of the party, but he does have a market for his Never Trump message, and I think the place to watch there is New Hampshire, the Always Trump portion-

KRISTOL:

I mean on that side. How much does it matter? I suppose you could argue though, what if Never Trump- what if Christie gets 20%, 23%? Does it really stop Trump or is it just a little speed bump along the way?

AYRES:

Who knows? Depends upon whether he beats Trump or not in New Hampshire. Depends upon what the level of votes are. I mean, you and I were there in 1996 where 4,000 votes separated Lamar Alexander and Pat Buchanan and Bob Dole. So it can be very, very close sometimes, and the margin of votes makes a big difference, but who comes in first is critical. I do think once the focus turns to the South, that the tough guy from New Jersey might not sell as well, and there's not as big a Never Trump portion of the party in the Southern primaries as there is in New Hampshire, but it's at least worth keeping an eye on. The Always Trump portion of the party is, as we've said, about a third, 35% or so. They are Always Trump. It has seemed to me that Ron DeSantis, in major miscalculation, has been going after the Always Trump voters.

And it's pretty clear, that's all Vivek Ramaswamy is going after are the Always Trump voters. But guess what? They're Always Trump because they're always going to vote for Trump and they're not going to vote for the second-best Trump when they can get the real thing. So I'm not sure who they're going for. I guess Ramaswamy is looking for the Republicans who really revere Neville Chamberlain, the former British Prime minister who went to see Hitler and announced that there was peace in our time. I think the symbol for the Ramaswamy campaign needs to be a white surrender flag woven by the Heritage Foundation based upon the ad that we saw yesterday from them. And then if he's president, he can take it to President Zelensky and say, "Here, wave this in front of Putin. I'm cutting off aid to Ukraine. I think you should give Putin all the land that he stole from you. We're going to eliminate sanctions on Russia that were put on as a result of his invasion of Ukraine. And by the way, we're going to forbid Ukraine from joining NATO."

It is a massive surrender and I think that's what Vivek stands for. Nikki Haley gutted him on it, and that's really going to come back to bite him if he ever goes anywhere in this race.

KRISTOL:

Do you think just on that, since you and I care about Ukraine, it does feel to me like, it's funny. Certainly, Ramaswamy and Trump are pretty much on the, let's say the anti-Ukraine side and DeSantis is waffled, but certainly even last night was not strong for Ukraine and the others are all on the other side. Christie, Pence, have both been there. Haley was very, very strong, as you say. And it feels to me like that is, if there's any opportunity for... If there's any issue on which one could imagine the "Maybe Trump: voters moving away from Trump, but also away from DeSantis and Ramaswamy. That's one of them, right? Because the party is split and has moved in a slightly less anti-Putin direction in the last year and a half. But it's still, if you look at the polls, kind of 50/50-ish basically, on more aid or not to Ukraine. And depending on how it's framed, I think if it's framed in the Nikki Haley way, I think she'd actually get a majority. Even last night in the debate hall, it sounded like there was a bit of a flip and that Haley got applause when she went after Ramaswamy. So I wonder if that issue could become a... And once this foreign policy doesn't matter and all that, but I wonder

if it could become a little more of an issue. And anyway, I'm curious what you think about that, and then talk about the "Maybe Trump" types as well.

AYRES:

Okay. Well, Bill, the people who really care about foreign policy in the Republican Party are all for supporting Ukraine. If they criticized Biden, the Biden administration about anything, it's because they did not give them enough when they wanted it. They'd strung out their aid when they should have given them more at the start. So there is a constituency in the Republican Party that believes that America is the best force for good in the world, that the world is a better place when America plays a leading role in it, and those people tend to be motivated by support for Ukraine in the Republican Party. There is, as we've said, a "Maybe Trump" portion of the party, that's the majority of the party, some 55%. These are people who voted for Trump twice, would vote for again in a heartbeat against Joe Biden, but are worried that he's too controversial, he carries too much baggage to get elected in 2024.

And so, the real goal for anyone not named Trump who wants to get the nomination, I think, is to consolidate that "Maybe Trump" portion of the party. I do think that Nikki Haley really helped herself last night. She was cool, she was tough, she was direct and she really stood out. And I think that she is likely to get a second look by those "Maybe Trump" voters. I don't know that they'll all gravitate to her, but I think of the other candidates on the stage, she's more likely to get a second look as an alternative to Trump than she was before the debate last night. I've never seen Mike Pence be stronger than he was last night. He was forceful, he was direct. He defended his actions on January 6th, and so did everybody else on the stage, interestingly enough. But he's caught between a rock and a hard place. He's too Trumpy for the non-Trumpies and not Trumpy enough for the Trumpies. And I don't know how he gets out of that box, but I thought he did a really nice job last night. Tim Scott did his Tim Scott thing, but it sort of faded as the night went along and he didn't seem to have much of a presence. He's a good man and he could do very well in Iowa with the evangelicals, but he just did not have a particularly good night last night. I think that Governor Burgum made a good case to be an energy secretary in a Republican administration, and that Asa Hutchinson made a good case to be an attorney general in a Republican administration. But otherwise, I don't know that they're serious players here.

So I think it's a very interesting group of people who are appealing to very different parts of the party. But if there is one who is going to give Donald Trump a run for his money, it's going to be someone who consolidates that "Maybe Trump" portion of the party, where people look at them and say, they've got a much better chance to win the presidency in 2024 than Donald Trump.

KRISTOL:

So it sounds, if you want to sort of conceptualize what you just said a little bit, you've got Trump and Ramaswamy in the Trump side of the party, let's call it. I assume it's very unlikely for Ramaswamy to surpass Trump unless something happens to Trump or whatever. So that's one side. Christie on the Never Trump side, and you as you say, can perhaps do well in New Hampshire and therefore shake things up, assuming someone else has done well in Iowa, I guess. And then it sounds like there are three or four then in the "Maybe Trump" competition. It's certainly Pence, Haley, and Scott. And then, can DeSantis still be... Started off getting some of those "Maybe Trump" voters in the

polls in February, March. And a lot of them maybe preferred somewhat Nikki Haley a little bit, they didn't like the sharp edges as much of DeSantis, but they were willing to go with him to stop Trump. How much has he just cast his lot in a way that doesn't let him pivot back? Or how much can he still compete for that big chunk there?

AYRES:

Well, he can't continue to do what he's been doing the last couple of months and hope to compete for those voters. There're more establishment Republicans in that "Maybe Trump" crowd. And it hasn't appeared to me that Ron DeSantis has targeted those people as opposed to the Always Trump voters. Calling Ukraine a territorial dispute and suggesting that vaccine conspiracy theorist Robert Kennedy Jr. would be a good candidate to run the Centers for Disease Control and doubling down on how slavery could have been beneficial to some enslaved people. Those are not the kinds of statements and comments that are going to appeal to the "Maybe Trump" portion of the party. So he's going to have to change a lot if he's going to be really competitive with that side of the party. But his weakness there does open the door to a Nikki Haley or someone else who can consolidate their votes.

KRISTOL:

I'm interested by your... I share your judgment, I think, in terms of the debate. Why couldn't Pence be the one who emerges rather than Haley? That is if... This is literally the Nixon analogy in a sense, but that's probably what made me think of it is, you want someone who is on board the Trump agenda, which Pence literally was part of until January 6th. But you don't want someone who goes along with January 6th, so Pence in a way is... What's a rock and a hard place in one way of looking at it, is a sweet spot, conceivably, in another. You get the Trump agenda without Trump's January 6th insanity, if you wanted to be charitable, if you wanted to make the case for Pence. But having said that, I'm struck that he, with his 99% name ID and having been on the ballot twice nationally, it's not a good sign that he's at four or five or 6%. In a way, Haley, you can say, okay, she's never been on the ballot nationally, so she has room to grow. People have heard of her a tiny bit, but they've never seen her probably. People have seen Mike Pence. He was on two vice presidential debates that which 40, 50, 60 million people watched. So maybe it's just as a matter of who he is and his candidate skills and his profile in general is less- He's got more of a cap, do you think? Or could that still change? I guess I'm still curious on the Haley- Scott, I do feel like, did not look to me last night like a guy who's going to break through and be the champion of that, let's call that "Maybe Trump" crowd. But I was just curious, say a word more about, you've been through this in several campaigns about Haley and Pence in particular. And DeSantis last night, do you think he was trying to... Was he internalizing any of your advice there? Or is he just... It was a little unclear, right?

AYRES:

I think DeSantis held serve. He came out about the same place he came in, but when you're going down, that's not generally a good place to be. I don't completely dismiss Mike Pence's chances if he continues to perform as well as he did last night. It's just that the Trumpies have such distaste for him because he did his duty and he did what the Constitution requires. I don't know how you get around that, but he did perform, I thought, very well last night, was very sincere. And if he keeps doing that well, he may surprise.

KRISTOL:

What would you say to this devil's advocate argument, which I half believe, which is that yes, so of course, you're right, your own polling showed this, and there's a lot of backup for it, that the 10% Never Trump, whatever 55% "Maybe Trump", 35% Trump is a reasonable way to look at the Republican electorate.

Another way to look at it is to say right now, 75 or 80% of the Republican electorate in the polling is for either Trump, DeSantis or Ramaswamy. And there's 20% being divided between Pence, Haley, and Scott, basically, and Christie actually. And maybe that's just the party's changed so much that "Maybe Trump" is closer to being pretty okay with Trump and Trumpism than would make it possible for a Pence or a Haley who are pro Ukraine, who are pro what Pence did on January 6th, makes it harder for that, maybe those "Maybe Trump" people to move there. I guess that would be the argument that the party is more Trumpy than your account suggests.

AYRES:

Yeah, and you may be right. And I have never discounted the possibility that Donald Trump could be the nominee of the Republican Party. I'm simply pushing back against these people who want to crown him the nominee today with all the events that are going to occur between now and next summer in Milwaukee. I just think it's premature to just declare that the nomination is his for the asking, regardless of what happens between now and then.

KRISTOL:

No, no, I think that's a very good caution. And I also agree that, I mean, everything's been so crazy for the last several years, why should this thing just go according to the sort of plan, right?

AYRES:

Good point.

KRISTOL:

And so, the Jack Smith wildcard is one. I guess the other thing your argument depends on, that, my quote, my argument could be accused of underestimating, is the contingency of Iowa and New Hampshire that we're not looking at one... Yes, if there were going to be one national vote on February 15th or March 10th or something like that, it's probably the case that, look at the polls and how does anyone make up that difference? And that's where the electorate is. But that's not quite how it works.

AYRES:

Of course not.

KRISTOL:

Go ahead.

AYRES:

And to do your numbers, the proportion of the party that's Trump and Ramaswamy, those numbers are lower in Iowa and New Hampshire today than they are nationally. And they're likely to continue to get lower as the other candidates get better known and campaign.

Tim Scott could surprise in Iowa. The evangelical vote is really important, and he speaks to evangelicals better than anybody else on that stage, frankly. So I think he could surprise in Iowa. Christie could surprise in New Hampshire. But regardless, the Trump number in both states today is lower than it is nationally.

KRISTOL:

No, I think that's really an important point. And in the past that has been a bit of a leading indicator because it's not just that, well, A, they'll all get much better known in Iowa, New Hampshire than nationally because they're going to spend a lot of money on ads, and they'll be there a lot and they'll get a ton of free media. But they've already been there quite a lot. And it wouldn't be crazy therefore, to argue that the voters in Iowa, New Hampshire have seen a lot more of these candidates than Republicans around the country.

Republicans around the country are in the Trump-is-an-incumbent-in-effect mode. And so Trump's at 55, but in Iowa, he's, I don't know, 42 and New Hampshire, maybe similar, I think. And maybe that tells us something that the more these other candidates, the more... For those states, it's a race. For the rest of the country it's, I guess we're going to nominate Trump again. And maybe if that continues, that dynamic continues, and I guess it does depend probably on something like the Jack Smith thing hitting a bit, but also Pence and/or Scott or Haley catching on or DeSantis conceivably.

Yeah, I think your scenario does depend a lot on the Iowa-New Hampshire deviating, as it were, from the national numbers and being a leading indicator of where things are going.

AYRES:

Exactly. Exactly. Who knows if that will happen, but it would not be at all unusual for the victory in Iowa to go to someone who is not in the lead in August. And then what happens in Iowa affects to a certain extent what happens in New Hampshire, not one for one, but if you do relatively well in Iowa, you can get a boost in New Hampshire.

So it's the dynamic of those states. And then we go to South Carolina. We've got Nevada and South Carolina, and you got a problem there if you're either Tim Scott or Nikki Haley, that they both have a base in the state. They need to make a pact that whoever between the two of them is the weaker candidate after New Hampshire gets out and endorses the other one. And that has a chance of one of those two doing well in South Carolina. It's hard to see both of them doing well though if they split their own base in South Carolina.

KRISTOL:

Don't you think that such a pact almost has to happen though, among the generally, let's call them the "Maybe Trump" candidates even before Iowa or something? Because if they all split that kind of evangelicals/business kind of establishment vote, which is put together, fairly substantial in Iowa, the Rubio plus Cruz vote, I think is the way someone put it a couple of weeks ago, and they both- Cruz won, and Rubio was third in Iowa in 2016. So it's not like there's no vote there.

But if they split it three ways, it feels like Pence and Scott would be overlapping a lot in the evangelical world, Haley would be overlapping with both of them in the more establishment world. And maybe that would happen naturally. Would it? If, in November, one of them is in the mid-teens and the other two are in single digits, does it just move to one of them even if the others don't get out? What do you think? How does that dynamic work?

AYRES:

Governor Sununu just did an op-ed a few days ago where he was basically arguing that the field should whittle down to no more than three or four candidates before Iowa. I don't know how you persuade someone to get out before people have actually voted. I just think that's very difficult to do and may be hard to get them to get out after people have voted. Look at John Kasich. He hung around in 2016, long after he had any reasonable chance of winning the nomination. Took votes away from Rubio, which hurt Rubio's ability to win some of those later primaries.

But the Democrats did it in 2020. After South Carolina, most of the candidates within a matter of days dropped out and endorsed Joe Biden. So it's happened before on the other side. We'll see if it happens on the Republican side.

KRISTOL:

People forget in 2000, Bush was a very strong front-runner. People like Quayle, my former boss, Vice President Quayle, Mrs. Dole, who were very respectable establishment candidates, they dropped out before the first vote was cast. I think Lamar at least thought about running again in 2000, maybe even tried for a couple of months. So that was a testament to Bush's strength, which you might say is comparable to Trump's strength a little bit this year. But it also allowed McCain to then make a real run at Bush because it made it close to a one-on-one race. And McCain came surprisingly close. And I do wonder-

AYRES:

And won New Hampshire, won New Hampshire going away.

KRISTOL:

Yeah, won New Hampshire. So I do wonder, yeah, even if they don't literally, well, they might literally get out as those candidates did or Scott Walker did in 2015, but they also could just fade and then get out after the vote. The voters do seem to have to pay attention, right, don't you think in a state like Iowa? If one candidate you kind of like is at 21% and another candidate you kind of like is at 7%, that some of those 7% go to the 21% candidate? I don't think they necessarily hang on until the... So maybe there's a natural consolidation in the-

AYRES:

Bill, most presidential campaigns die when they run out of money. And so the donors have a lot to say about how long these campaigns can go on. If it hadn't been for Sheldon Adelson, Newt Gingrich would not have been as active for as long as he was when he ran for president. So keep an eye on the bank account. Because if you run out of money you can't run.

KRISTOL:

That's really important. And of course, in just thinking about it for a second, Pence, Scott and Haley are not independently wealthy candidates, unlike Ramaswamy or Steve Forbes or something back in the day. And therefore, they really are, you can imagine a sort of donor conclave where they probably have overlapping donors anyway. And everyone says, "Okay, one of these three is just way ahead and as the possible non-Trump candidate, we need to consolidate." And that would be kind of interesting in November, December, I suppose, something maybe to... You don't think that's out of the question?

AYRES:

No, I don't.

KRISTOL:

Good. Trying to keep suspense alive, keep hope alive here. But it is, yeah, but I think I very sympathetic to your caution that people always want to declare these races over, and of course, usually the favorite wins. Usually the person who's ahead wins. But usually, it's also more tumultuous than people expect. And so, yes, Dole finally did win the nomination in '96, and yes, Bush finally won in 2000 and so forth, but it was closer there for a while than people expected. And maybe it won't be this time, I don't know. That's where the incumbency thing really kicks in. But Trump's such an unusual candidate too. We just don't know.

AYRES:

He's an unusual candidate at an unusual time. Never, ever have we had a serious candidate for president facing multiple felony counts with decades of prison time associated with them. This is a completely unprecedented situation. And I sure am not going to bet the farm on knowing what the outcome of any of that is going to be.

KRISTOL:

Yeah, I know. I look at it and sort of think, "God, he's reshaped the party so much." Look at that debate last night even, and it's his party now. But I also think that's partly true that's the kind of glass half empty, I guess, from my point of view side of it. But the glass half full side is, yeah, but he's also a guy who's under indictment for four separate felonies. One of them maybe not so serious in New York and a stretch, but certainly very serious ones in terms of the classified documents and January 6th.

And again, if the trial happens, that's one thing. But even if more evidence comes out and so forth, again, as voters really focus, voting does change people. When they have to vote, it's a little different from answering a public opinion poll.

AYRES:

Exactly. It's a far more serious action than just telling a pollster who you think you will vote for. But is a major party in America really going to nominate someone who's been convicted of felonies? I don't know. I don't know if he'd be convicted, I don't know if he'd be acquitted, but it is not outside the realm of possibility to imagine Donald Trump being convicted of a felony by a year from now when the Republicans gather in Milwaukee. Are they really going to nominate a felon? I don't know. Neither does anybody else.

KRISTOL:

He'll be appealing. And of course, it could be a hung jury and all kinds of things, so as you say.

AYRES:

Oh, sure, no. If he's acquitted or it's a hung jury, then it's game over.

KRISTOL:

Yeah. And we'll just see. Well, we'll know much more, this is why it's very interesting people are thinking about the next debate. I saw that last night. On September 27th, we'll see who continues to move. But what you're saying, if I can get back to the beginning of our conversation for a second, is yeah, focus a little more on August 28th, this coming Monday, then I may be on-

AYRES:

It's a big, big deal.

KRISTOL:

Yeah. Yeah. And then I think what happens in some of these other trials in terms of evidence coming out, and it sounds like in Meadows, in the case in Georgia, there's going to be a mini trial just to decide whether it goes to federal court or not. But there actually may have witnesses, like Raffensperger, I think is supposed to now testify also on Monday the 28th. That could be pretty dramatic. He's going to be there. I think this is federal court so it wouldn't be televised, but he'd be recounting, I suppose, the phone call that Meadows was on that Trump made to Raffensperger. So that brings it home in a way that maybe reading about it or even the January 6th committee didn't. Or maybe not. It is hard to... Yeah, we have not gone through this before, I guess this particular experiment.

AYRES:

You think?

KRISTOL:

Having said all that, you mentioned the Democrats earlier where there's not much in a way of a challenge to Biden, you've been pretty staunch in the view, and I've shared it, that he's not the strongest Democratic candidate, the age is a big problem and not a fixable one, honestly. But I've got to say, Dean Phillips has been sort of somewhat courageously, I've got to say, for a back bench Democratic member of Congress sort of saying, "Hey, someone else should get in here. We can't just risk having, if Biden defeats someone else, maybe that's shows that he's stronger, but just giving it to him on a platter is too risky." But there's not been much response, I've got to say. Don't you think It looks like these Democratic establishments really just decided we're not even entertaining these other thoughts, we're all in for Biden?

AYRES:

Is there really a Democrat, not associated with the Biden White House, who truly in their heart of hearts believes that offering to the country an 82-year-old man with a vice president whom virtually no one says is ready for prime time is the strongest ticket the Democrats can offer the country? They've got a number of governors, several of them in key swing states. You can imagine Josh Shapiro from Pennsylvania with Gretchen Whitmer from Michigan as the number two spot, just to do a thought experiment. Is

there anybody who really believes that ticket wouldn't be stronger than a Biden/Harris ticket? Really? I don't know any Democrat who, in their heart of hearts, thinks that Biden really is the strongest one they can offer, but nobody's going to run against an incumbent president in their own party, no one of real substance. But again, it's a long way between now and the nominating process next summer for the Democrats. So who knows what could happen between now and then, but most Democrats I know are not particularly excited about the prospect of an 82-year-old guy who's clearly lost his step carrying the banner for their party.

KRISTOL:

Yeah, I'd say this, I totally agree. And I've talked to a lot of Democrats about this, and they are where you say they are, with a caveat that some of them would say, "Well, that's very nice, Bill and Whitt, for you guys to say that you get to have your Shapiro/Whitmer or Whitmer/Warnock or whatever ticket you want with strong swing state politicians who are 30 years younger than Biden and who proved in 2022 incidentally that they can win in the current environment in the key states." I mean, for me, that was really ... I thought after that, after Whitmer won by 10 points, I thought people would say, "Geez, I mean I thought only Biden could win in these swing states. Hillary had lost them. I thought only he could appeal to these Trump-tempted voters," but literally, Gretchen Whitmer and Shapiro won in Whitmer's case probably 4% or 5%, in Shapiro's case, 7-8% of the Trump voters in their state. I mean, leaving aside that it was an off-year election, but that's just factually the case.

If the state's a one or 2% state in the presidential race and it's a 10% state in the governor's race, she's won some voters who Biden didn't. So how do you say Whitmer or Shapiro or others' polls aren't as stronger or stronger than Biden and you take away the risk of being 82 and you have a fresh look at the VP pick too? They would say, "Well, that's very nice, but how do we get from here to there? Because we're going to have a primary of 10 people if Biden doesn't run. And there's no guarantee that the ones you like, Bill and Whit, get the nomination." And meanwhile, there's a huge amount of resentment if Harris is deprived of the nomination, so we're better off just keeping our head down and hoping there's some advantages to incumbency. I don't agree with that argument, and I've argued vociferously against it in private, and public for that matter, but I'm struck how many of them have just defaulted to that argument. But I wonder how much they even believe that argument and how much it's just a way of, since no one has the courage to take on an incumbent president, this is kind of a nice rationale for not doing so.

AYRES:

Bill, 70% of Americans do not want a Biden/Trump rematch, 70%. What's it going to say about the credibility of our political system if the process offers up two candidates opposed by 70% of Americans? You would think there would be an opening there for somebody not named Biden or not named Trump, but you've got the problem with the two parties that are sort of locked in or appear to be kind of locked in at the moment. But you would think there would be a huge sigh of relief with millions of voters in this country if they ended up with at least another option. And let's don't go down the new labels road, because there's simply not enough room for a third party candidate to gather enough electoral votes to win the presidency. It would be nice to have another option, but because of the structure of our system, the best they could possibly do, I think, is to throw the election into the House, which would lead to Donald Trump's reelection.

KRISTOL:

Yeah, or take away some key percentage point of votes in key states, which probably more from Biden than Trump. So almost certainly I'd say more from Biden than Trump, which also helps Trump, which does get to the question of sort of for all the troubles of the Republican Party, and while that some of us would be pretty horrified to have Trump as president again, I don't know, it's not as if he's an overwhelming underdog in the general election at this point.

AYRES:

No. No, he's not. He could win. The polling is pretty clear that he could win, especially if the opponent is an 82-year-old guy with a not ready for prime time VP. He could certainly win. And I think there are a lot of Democrats that are sort of whistling past the graveyard saying, "Oh, there's no way in the world Donald Trump could get elected." That is not true.

KRISTOL:

Yeah, I think that's for me such an important point. And it is one that Democrats don't want to hear and they don't want to believe. But yeah, incidentally, it's helping Trump in the Republican primary in this kind of weird rebound way, because one of the main arguments against Trump is no one quite has the nerve in the Republican side, and most people haven't had the nerve until now to take him on on the merit, so to speak, is, "Well, but he has too much baggage. Too much baggage, we don't want to get into all this stuff". DeSantis tried just last night, to discuss the history, but just too much baggage, you can't win. But then you see polls, it's 43/43. Well, that argument goes away, which helps him get nominated. And then there we are at a toss up race. I mean -

AYRES:

Yup. No, you're exactly right. I mean, having an incumbent democratic president with a job approval of 41%, which is not likely to go up, who's 82 years old, who has a weak vice president helps Donald Trump in the Republican primary, because it makes his forces able to argue with some data behind them that Donald Trump could win.

KRISTOL:

This isn't ... yeah, okay, so Jack Smith, the fate of the nation depends on a possible trial starting on January 2nd, but not entirely, because I do think ... for me, what's interesting about this discussion is I think you're stressed, which I haven't ... I'm not quite where you are on it, I think, but it's obviously just a matter of probabilities in any case, but the extent to which that "Maybe Trump" vote is still up for grabs. I guess that's really what you're ... maybe not fully up for grabs, as you said yourself, comfortable voting for Trump again, if it comes to it. So not exactly ... we're not in Jean McCarthy rebelling against the Vietnam War and Lyndon Johnson territory.

AYRES:

They're not Never Trumpers.

KRISTOL:

Right.

AYRES:

They're "Maybe Trumpers".

KRISTOL:

Yeah. And some of them are maybe okay with Trumpers, and others who maybe kind of wish we could get out of this stuff. But it does seem to me like what you're suggesting and what's interesting and suggestive about what you're saying is that a Pence or a Haley or Scott or conceivably a DeSantis shows there's some opportunity there. And I suppose just to strengthen your argument, that DeSantis sort of showed people were willing to jump off Trump in February, March. I mean, he moved from the teens up to 30ish maybe, and Trump was down around 40. And they've now kind of gone back to Trump with DeSantis declining, but presumably they once deserted Trump, as it were. Why couldn't they desert him again, especially if it looks like he's going to be... he has been indicted and looks like he's going to be on trial and actually goes on trial. I guess that really just strengthens the question of the Pence, Haley, Scott, maybe DeSantis the second time, could one of them really surge? I guess that's what I come back to. One of them has to kind of really ... they can't just lurk at 4%, 5%, 6% though. I mean that really would be -

AYRES:

Yeah. No, one of them's got to surge, but I mean, in the wake of the disappointment of the 2022 election, there were a number of polls, including one of ours, that showed DeSantis actually ahead of Trump. So your point is well taken. At least at that point, they were willing to support someone other than Trump.

KRISTOL:

And it sounds like though that that surge probably you think happens on the ground in Iowa and is reflected in the vote in Iowa. We're not going to sort of magically see national polls moving in massive ways?

AYRES:

Right. And New Hampshire too.

KRISTOL:

Right, and not -

AYRES:

New Hampshire's just such a different -

KRISTOL:

Right. Not until Iowa, I'm saying.

AYRES:

Yeah, exactly. New Hampshire is just such a different beast, a totally different electorate from Iowa. But yeah, I mean, it's got to happen in Iowa and/or New Hampshire before any national numbers are likely to move at all.

KRISTOL:

So that combined with, I suppose, the possibility of a January trial in DC, people who are yearning for someone to rally to 30% in the next week or month, they're probably going to be disappointed. I guess there could be -

AYRES:

Not happening.

KRISTOL:

Not happening, but there could be some movement. I mean, it could become clear-

AYRES:

Oh sure.

KRISTOL:

-that Haley is an alternative.

AYRES:

Yeah. It looks like the ocean is very calm. It looks like there's nothing happening, that it's just very smooth sailing, but there's all kinds of churning beneath the surface, and we'll see if that churning actually disturbs the surface of the waters or not, but it would be a mistake to assume that everything is just calm and copacetic underneath the surface.

KRISTOL:

Now that's a very good metaphor, I think, and a good note to end on. Will the churning, so to speak, breakthrough and begin to capsize to threaten the big ship? Or is it just some kind of a little bit of rough seas on the way to a pretty straightforward journey? I mean, because -

AYRES:

That's why we play the game and why they have elections.

KRISTOL:

Well said. Well said. And we look forward to those elections and we look forward to continuing to get your really thoughtful and helpful guidance on how to think about these events as they come. But for short term now, focus on... let's see when the trial gets scheduled. I guess that'll get scheduled Monday, and it doesn't sound as if... I guess they could appeal that and so forth, but it sounds like judges have a lot of discretion on when to schedule trials, I think that if she decides to go.

AYRES:

Judges have a lot of discretion when to schedule, and I think it would be rare for an appeals court to second guess a judge's decision about when a trial should occur.

KRISTOL:

Okay. So that's the next thing to see, and then there'll probably be other events we haven't even thought of that'll happen in the next 2, 3, 4 months. So Whitt, thanks so much for joining me again.

AYRES:

Always a pleasure, Bill. Always a pleasure.

KRISTOL:

My pleasure. And thank you all for joining us on Conversations.