

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Doug Sosnik Conversation

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BILL KRISTOL:

Hi, I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome back to *Conversations*. I'm very pleased to be joined today by Doug Sosnik, veteran political analyst and strategist. Had very senior roles in the Clinton White House, political director and senior advisor to the president for, I think, six years. I'm sure they flew right by, Doug, and it was no challenges, no tension, no issues with impeachment or anything. But Doug was a key strategist in the Clinton Democratic world. Before that, chief of staff to Senator Chris Dodd. So, Hill experience as well, major private sector clients over the last couple of decades, including the NBA. And as Jokić deserves all of his fame and everything, all the publicity he's gotten is due to you, right, Doug?

DOUG SOSNIK:

Whatever you say, Bill.

BILL KRISTOL:

Is Jokić as nice a guy in person as he seems in public?

DOUG SOSNIK:

I haven't met him, but I'm told by my colleagues who work there that he is pretty much, what you see is what you get.

BILL KRISTOL:

It's fantastic, I think, anyway. So, Doug has thought a lot about and written a lot about political realignment, and in fact a recent memo of his really caught my attention, *The Road to a Political Realignment in American Politics*. I was struck by this, was something I was interested in back many decades ago when I studied a little political science and Walter Dean Burnham wrote about realigning elections. And I think your argument, Doug, is that there really is a realignment.

So, anyway, first, thanks for joining me today. And I think people will learn a lot from this as a sort of analytical—political science, but not in a political science-y way—study of what's going on in American politics. So, Doug, thanks for joining me.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Great, thank you. It's great to be here.

BILL KRISTOL:

So, people have talked about realignments and what is the realignment? And why isn't it just, oh, a few things have changed, but come on, it's the same system you and I grew up in, whatever, 40 years ago. So, walk us through a little bit what that realignment really is.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well, I think there is a once in a, not even generation, but once in a lifetime realignment in American politics. And it's something for Bill and I—who are probably older than almost everyone on this call—we've had to relearn what's going on in American politics because we, I think, had a pretty good handle on what politics was like in the past, but it's not necessarily a good guide to what's going on now or where we're headed in future.

And I would say that this realignment started probably a little over half a century ago. And I can walk through the reasons and the timing, but if I could distill it down into one simple sentence, unlike when Bill and I grew up in politics where there was a saying that was sort of the North Star, which is: "all politics is local." I think now, "all politics is national." And how you vote for president is the same as how you vote for Congress, it's the same as how you vote for mayors, how you vote for state legislature. And so, that is really turning on its side how politics in our country's oriented.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, that's interesting. So, people talk generally about polarization, but this is really the political, the electoral side you might say, of the broader sorting and polarization that's gone on.

DOUG SOSNIK:

That's right. It's just the data is unambiguous about this. 45 out of 50 states voted for the same presidential candidate in 2016 and 2020. 95 of 100 senators are of the same party as the presidential candidate who carried their state in the last election. As Bill and I have discussed in the past, as recently as the 1980s, over half the senators were of a different party than the candidate who carried their state in the last presidential election.

There are 23, only 23 members of the House that are of a different party than the presidential candidate who carried their district in 2022. There are 39 states now where one political party controls the governorship and the state legislatures. Over half the state legislatures in the country now are veto-proof and can almost unilaterally pass anything that they want to pass at the state and local level.

So, I think that these numbers show how we have now sorted politically in our country.

BILL KRISTOL:

No, it's remarkable, and the fact that I use, which I haven't double-checked, but I think it's correct... It's very close to being correct. When I came to Washington in 1985, more than half the states had one senator from each party. I think 26 states had one senator from each party. And then presumably of the remaining 24, there was like a 14-12 split. So, whichever the other party controlled the Senate by a couple of seats, few seats. Now-

DOUG SOSNIK:

To that point, Bill, as recently as in the early 2000s, you had two Democratic senators representing North Dakota. You had two Democratic senators representing South Dakota. And you had two Democratic senators representing Nebraska.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, yeah, amazing. But a state where the Senate representation goes back and forth, which would've been the case there since there had been Republican senators in those states before and would be after. Or a state where there's one senator from each party, Moynihan and D'Amato in New York and Warner and Robb in Virginia and... to take just the places I lived before coming here.

That's a very different politics from a state that's got two Democratic senators, a Democratic governor, always votes Democratic for president, Democratic house delegation, democratic state legislature or the opposite obviously with Republican. And I guess the core point here is just empirically that we now are in a world where most, a large majority, right, of states are much more in the president, governor, senate, house, state legislature, all on one side and not really problematic even in that respect. There can be an upset, of course, Manchin in West Virginia kind of thing. To finish my point, 26 states then, five states now have one senator from each party, 26. That's a very different politics in terms of policy, in terms of elections, in terms of the country, isn't it then? I just think people have not come to grips with just that fundamental change.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well, that's right. And I think, look, you can say what you want about elected officials, but one thing that they do understand is self-preservation. And we currently have a political system that rewards what I call bad behavior. So, for the overwhelming majority of elected officials, they're much more vulnerable to losing a primary than they are a general election based on this sorting around the country. So, as a result of that, their incentives as they think about policy decisions and whether they're willing to cross lines, the incentive structure in our country is set up right now for both the left and the right for members to take the extreme positions in order to avoid losing a primary.

BILL KRISTOL:

On the other side of that, that I think is less commented on sometimes in the primaries, is just they live in a world where it's an echo chamber, not a competitive world. Maybe that's not the best way to put it, but it's also just everyone they talk to is on the same side. Even if they don't have a primary challenge, it's just kind of everything reinforces as opposed to what were the alternatives moderating or checking. Don't you find that you've known so many politicians over the years, very different world where Bill Clinton has to function in Arkansas, right, than when Chuck Schumer and Nancy Pelosi are from New York and the Republicans are from Texas and Florida and so forth?

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well, that's right. There are a variety of reasons for this, including technology. But the bottom line is people are self-selecting where they live, who they associate with, and increasingly in our evenly and narrowly, narrowly and evenly, and profoundly divided country, people are largely now self-selecting to be around people just like themselves.

So, it does have that reinforcing mechanism and echo chamber. Where I can remember in 2016 where I was quite surprised that Trump won, talk about 2020, where I was less surprised by how well he did. But I only had a handful of people I knew who voted for Trump. So, all my data points reinforced my preconceived notion of how the election was going to come out.

BILL KRISTOL:

So, I want to come back to the way to the evenly divided side of it and the so few competitive states and what all the implications of that are and the suburbs, as you point this out in the memo as seemingly the swing. But educational achievement or attainment, you point out in the memo, is crucial, that it's become a huge—the diploma divide, I think is the term I don't know if you coined or you use—and talk about that a little because now, again, I think people, it's happened sort of gradually, though maybe a little more suddenly in the last couple of election cycles, but talk about that history and where we are on that.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Yeah, this will take me just a moment. Just remember that politics is a lagging indicator of what's going on in America. It is sort of the last place that you will see what has actually been happening. And so, to me, and it's really hard when you're living in the middle of this unbelievable period of change in our country, it's hard to believe you're actually seeing how big it is because you're just living it.

But just take it a step back, I believe that we are going through the biggest change in our society since the late 1800s when we were transitioning from an agrarian society to an industrial society. That transition takes around 30 or 40 years. There are a lot of people in that process that get left behind. And I believe that we are transitioning from a 20—I don't believe, I think it's quite clear—we have transitioned now from a 20th century top-down manufacturing economy to a 21st century digital global world.

And just as you saw the farmers who got left behind in the late 1800s, there are a group of people, particularly people who didn't go to college, who were left behind as we made this transition. And this has been a 50-year transition. Didn't happen overnight. I believe it all started with the Vietnam War, and not in the way that most people talk about the Vietnam War.

I think the Vietnam War was the beginning of this revolt in America against people with money and power. The Vietnam War was the first war we've ever fought as a country where we were not all in this together. And people with money and power could game the system. So, I think that was the seeds for the anger that people feel towards people in power in this country. They think the system is rigged.

Then you began in the early 1970s, the actual beginning of the decline of manufacturing in America. And then that was accelerated, and I'm not sure Bill will agree with all I'm getting ready to say about the economics, but I believe that obviously speaking as a Democrat and from the Milton Friedman school and Professor Jensen from Harvard, where they were promoting a shareholder economy and capitalism, where everything was driven around the value of the stock.

And then you began in the '80s, not only shareholder capitalism where the worker's no longer valued, but offshoring, where you were incentivized to cut costs and the gap between... There were four lines that used to go in tandem. It was GDP growth, worker productivity, employment, and wages. And starting McAfee's—Andy McAfee, he's an MIT professor—talked about the de-linking in the '70s, where for the first time there's an old saying, what was good for General Motors was good for America. The more cars General Motors sold, the more people got jobs, the more they made money. Well, the de-linking that started in the '70s was as GDP growth went up and its productivity went up, wages and employment became flat. So, you then had this trend now of the hollowing out of the middle class. And the people who were the hardest hit were people who had good jobs and did not have a college degree. And so, you began this extended period of economic decline in this country for the middle class that, as I mentioned, started in the '70s, accelerated in the '80s. And then you really saw as it continued now with China and globalization in the 90s and beginning of this century, and then the 2008 economic crisis, which really came down hardest on these people who'd been the hardest hit.

And so, you've had this long decline of the middle class and people who resent the fact that at the same time they've been declining, people at the top have never had it better and have been the big winners in all of this. So, this has created a very toxic political environment. And it's, by the way, it's from the left and the right that resent this that's going on. And so, just fast-forwarding politically, quickly, as I mentioned before, politics is a lagging indicator. I think the 1992 presidential election was the first time this showed up in politics. And that it began with Pat Buchanan's speech at the Republican Convention, which I'm sure, Bill you remember.

BILL KRISTOL:

Well, and the primary challenge before that to Bush actually. Yeah, we got surprising number of votes in New Hampshire on this, precisely what you're talking about, on that platform. Yeah.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Yes. And then in the general election, Ross Perot got almost 20 million votes and 19% of the vote. And then as you move into the 2000s, which put the Bush presidency, which I think was from these people who've been the hardest hit economically, I think they were very much against the war. And they're the ones who fought the war. And they're the ones who, we saw the squandered surpluses that were wasted. Tax cuts for the rich, tax cuts for corporations.

The Republicans in the early part of this century controlling the Congress and the White House were much bigger spenders than Democrats ever were. This created enormous additional resentment within the Republican Party towards the powers that be. And Palin's vice-presidential nomination in 2008, the Tea Party movement in 2009 and '10, this is the takeover of the Republican Party by the anti-Rockefeller establishment lane.

And the last thing I'll say, which I think is critical to understand American politics today: Donald Trump did not create what's going on in our country. He just accelerated through his 2016 campaign and his presidency these trends that had been forming long before he entered the fray. And I just, there's one vital statistic I think which tells you how it transcends partisanship from before.

There were 206 counties in the country that voted for Obama in 2008 and Obama in 2012 who voted for Trump in 2016. And those were all disproportionately lower educated, lower income. And in 2020, when Biden beat Trump, he only carried 25 of those counties. When Biden got elected in 2020, Trump carried 84% of the counties in this country. And so, Biden, who won the election overwhelmingly by the popular voter, over 7 million more, he only carried 16% of the counties. But of those 16% of the counties that he carried, over 70% of the GDP growth in our country were in those Biden counties that he won. And the link between those counties and the understanding who live there is the fact that those are the counties that overwhelmingly, disproportionately had higher educated people living there.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, no, and in the memo, you really, let's just talk about the education thing a little. Because it is striking when you—and I think what's very interesting in your memo and what you've just said—is the focus on '92 as a key inflection point, which feels right to me because the Buchanan-Perot thing kind of came out of nowhere. Perot got 19% of the vote, almost 20 million votes, I think. And Perot was a pretty wacky candidate. And there's not been much stomach for third party or independent candidates in America. Hadn't been at that point for what, a century, really. Wallace a regional candidate, but not that kind of Perot broad, populist reaction.

But before that, in '88, George HW Bush carries, if I'm not mistaken, New Jersey and California, among other states. He carries upscale suburbs. That's the Republican world. And then that really begins to change dramatically in '92. So, talk a little bit about the educational, the way in which education starts to just break open to transform really, I think what I want to say, what had been the system we were kind of used to really from Roosevelt through probably through HW Bush or through Reagan, I guess.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Right. So, when I was trying to figure out how to explain what was going on in American politics, at first I started talking, I was thinking, well, maybe it's class. And then maybe I was - but that didn't quite work. And then it was like, well, maybe it's just people with money. But

you take a Mike Lindell, who I don't know now, but at least the past, he's had a lot of money. So, you couldn't explain it by money.

So, what really came down to me was education. But it's bigger than education because education is a proxy, I think, for something that's much larger. But if you look at any of the statistics of the gap between CEO pay and workers on the line pay and people who are at the top and how much they're making, as I mentioned earlier, that gap really kind of exploded between beginning of the 1970s and up until really this day. And then if you look at the through line, the thread, of how do you explain the differences between the winners and the losers? It comes back to education.

And so, basically, if you tell me the education profile of a district or a city or a state, I can tell you how they're going to vote. Now it's not a hundred percent right, but it's about 85 or 90% right. Whereas in the past, race was a good indicator and other indices. It is education. But education, as I say, it's bigger than just education. It's a proxy for your view of the world, how you culturally view things.

In a sense, if you're educated and built for today's economy, let me just mention one thing to show you how it's changed. Up until around 20 years ago, all the way through the history of our country, people moved to where jobs were. But in the last couple of decades, companies are now moving to places where they have employees that they want to hire. That's a profound change in terms of relationship between workers and employees. And so if you're a winner in this, where they call it a "hinge moment" in history, if you think about a hinge, it's a piece of metal that holds two pieces of wood together. And professor Dyson from Princeton talks about hinge moments in history, where the hinge is transitioning from one era to another. And we, as I say, I think are in a hinge moment, that we haven't seen since the late 1800s. So in this new hinge moment era, if you're the right kind of worker with the right kind of education and background, your opportunity has never been greater in the history of our country. And if you're on the other side of this hinge moment, where you don't have the skills and don't have the education for this new society, your chances of upward mobility has never been worse. In fact, you're more likely with upper mobility in Europe, than the United States. Can you imagine such a thing?

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Yeah, the way I put the fault line is half the country thinks the country's not changing fast enough for the moment, and the other half of the country thinks we're changing too fast. And so everything is colored about whether or not you feel like you have a win to your back in terms of opportunity or win to your face. And so that's why you have this education fault line, because that's the best through line and thread to predict whether or not you're going to be a winner or a loser in this new economic system. Now it will change, and if we have time AND you're interested, we can talk about it. I do think we're going to come out of this, but as we transition from the agrarian society to an industrial society, that takes decades before it moves all the way down to benefit more people.

BILL KRISTOL:

And the only thing I'd add, and I don't think you'd disagree with this at all, you alluded to it, in addition to sort of just pure, let's say economic opportunity, so much of it is also values and comfort with a multicultural society and with a multiracial society and so forth. And diversity as it's not an accident that term has become so big, right? On the one hand. And wokeness and identity politics, so much a term of hostility on the other. I do think it's an economic divide and a sociological and cultural divide, but it is new. I mean, I guess that's what I come

back to. Just to sort of put a pin on that one point, you couldn't look at America politically in the 70s or 80s and sort of do what you've just said, which is sort out demographically by educational achievement, and really even more if you start going to postgraduate degrees and so forth and say that's democratic, that's Republican.

If anything, it was slightly the opposite way, but it was more mixed, basically. And that's why you have very different politics when there are so many competitive states with mixed up coalitions so to speak, as opposed to this national sorting. I myself always thought the oil politics' local thing was wrong. But that's because I came to Washington late enough, frankly, that by the time I really got involved after I worked a few years in the education department where I wasn't really in politics, it was already obvious...one thing I did see, I didn't see all this stuff that you've laid out in the memo... Well, I didn't see all that very clearly, but I did see that it's just not correct anymore. People in well-educated suburbs, or in college towns, have more in common with each other wherever they are in the country. And people in areas that have lost jobs or rural areas have more in common with each other.

And that's why they're the red dots and blue states, and the blue dots and red states is also very important phenomenon. I mean, the districts in New York that went Republican, surprising people in 2020, but especially in 22, those look like central Pennsylvania districts demographically and sociologically. And they were sort of lagging, because New York was more liberal in general. And so people didn't quite make the move as early as they did in Kentucky or Pennsylvania or something. But I feel like just that insight about the sorting, which people have a sense of you, really bring it home in that memo. But just on the education side just to finish that point... The Democratic states are better educated and Democratic districts are better educated, and Republican states and districts... less college education. And that's not quite uniform but pretty close. And it's accelerated the change from '92 to 2000 to 2008 to 2016. Trump really does seem to put a lot of gas into that, in 2016, accelerating what was happening already, right?

DOUG SOSNIK:

Yeah and I think just a couple of quick points from you. First of all, to the extent back in the 80s and 70s. It started in the late 60s, and certainly in this case in the 70s and 80s, to the extent that you could look at voting in America and try to find the one sort of cleavage where it was clear was race. And outside of race, there weren't the cuts of partisanship like you mentioned between women and men and education levels and even by income. The first thing. Secondly, you're right about the fact that in the 80s you could see what was coming. And so you take a guy like Joe Manchin...in a sense, the people who are defying the laws of political gravity are essentially grandfathered, but once they leave, gravity will take its course. So you had much of a white, moderate conservative southern Democrats who were longtime incumbents in the house in the 80s and early 90s, who were going to stay there as long as they chose to.

But once they left, it was inevitable that the laws of political gravity are going to resettle, and those are all going to become Republican districts. The third thing is, there are 46 congressional districts right now that the Cook Report considers competitive. Only three of them are in rural areas. None of them are urban areas. So they're all in suburban areas. Now, suburban areas could be, if you think about whatever community you're in as you're watching the zoom, I mean, it's true across the country, the more densely populated a suburb is and generally probably closer to a city, the more likely they are to be democratic, and the less densely populated and probably more closer to rural areas, more likely they are to be Republican. But these are the areas of the battlegrounds in American politics. It's not rural areas and it's not urban areas. And the last thing I'll say, which is, I think, of particular danger to Democrats. Is the Democratic Party becoming a party of the educated and Blacks, to some extent minorities. But that's changing with more Hispanics and Asians I think voting based on educational levels for Republicans. But one of the problems that Democrats have in getting

voters in the country, and it's just the language of Democrats use like "flyover" parts of the country, which is a pejorative term. And we as Democrats will never get the voters in these areas if they think we're looking down on them, if they think we're looking down on their choices of entertainment. Frankly, Democrats have to figure out the fact that 75 million people voted for Trump. I mean, they're not all idiots, they're not all morons. If you want to treat them as idiots and treat them as morons, there's a pretty good chance you'll never get their vote. Now, there are a lot of really sketchy people who voted for Trump, and they're ungettable and Democrats have no shot and shouldn't try to. But being captive to a party driven by the educated elites, is a very dangerous thing for the Democratic Party going forward if we want to be a majority party.

BILL KRISTOL:

And Joe Biden looks less like that kind of Democrat. And it was very fortunate in my point of view that he won the nomination in 2020, and it wasn't obvious that that was going to happen, right?

DOUG SOSNIK:

In primaries, you have what is referred to as a chemical reaction. It happens at some point. You can't predict it, but it happens and it's there. And the chemical reaction in 2020 was the fact that it was either going to be Bernie Sanders as a democratic nominee or someone else, and the party quickly coalesced behind Biden as to someone else. And by the way, if you look at all the mistakes that Trump did as president, all the crazy things he said, all the crazy things he did, he almost won the election.

BILL KRISTOL:

I know. It is, yeah.

DOUG SOSNIK:

And if you go back and look at who else could have been the nominee other than Biden, it's hard for me to see that anyone else other than Biden would've won 2020.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, that's important, I think. Maybe just one final final point on just the analytical side and before we get to each party and the even balance and swing states and all, which is sort of the implication of what you've been laying out. The total collapse of split-ticket voting. I mean, again, if you're our age, you sort of remember that era, right? By definition, if Democrats control the house and Reagan wins 49 states, that's a heck of a lot of split ticket voting going on. And that was true into '88 and '92, as you say, even in the 2000s with these democratic senators from Republicans, presidential states, that is really collapsed at the state level, but also at the house district level. How many? There are 23 districts, or something like that, that voted for a member of Congress in 2020 against their presidential candidate? 23 or whatever the right number is, 5% of the congressional districts. So that is just a country that's lined up in a sort of parliamentary way, you might say, but down to the state level and the state representative level. And I mean it's good, or it's bad. I think it's mostly not great for the country, for obvious reasons, but no one chose it. And incidentally I do think a lot of the people redistricting and all these things, that is a problem. I mean gerrymandered, you get more gerrymandering when you have already the polarization, it's sort of self-reinforcing. But I feel like people overdo the kind of gerrymandering side of it when they talk about it, and not just that this is where the country has kind of landed socioeconomically here.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well, I think I'd say a couple of things. First of all, we will get out of this, although I think it's going to take well into this decade, but we've got to change the reward system so that the politicians will change. And part of that is how we're gerrymandering, and rank choice voting.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right.

DOUG SOSNIK:

And there are variety of things that encourage, and you're seeing it happening at the state level, now. So I think that changing the reward system is going to be ultimately, well, that and the fact if... just to finish this thought... So to me, we can get out of this, we will not get out of this probably in this decade, eight out of the last nine elections, the country voted out either a president or control of the House or control of the Senate. So we're currently in a period where the people aren't voting for someone, they're motivated more by voting against someone. And that's part of what I think was Biden's appeal in '20. And I think what part of the strategy in the White House today is to really try to stay out of the way and make it a referendum on Trump. And just to finish the point about ticket splitting, and this should be a blinking red light for Republicans. There were in fact significant, or I would call it meaningful, ticket splitting in 2022.

And those were Republicans in governor's races and in Senate races, voting Democratic. Now in governor's races they were double-digit. And in Senate races there were depending on the state between six and eight or 10%. Now that's not days in the past, but if you're dealing with razor-thin differences, and if you have 25% of Republicans or 30% of Republicans who are never-Trumpers, they can be very significant in the outcome of these states that have been closed. And don't take my word for it. After the Republicans failed for the second cycle in a row to take the Senate back. The first thing Mitch McConnell said was, we lost because we had terrible candidates. But the second thing he said was, Republican defections were one of the main reasons Republicans lost, didn't take control of the Senate. So I think there is a group of ticket splitters that I think could probably increase based on how the Republican primary plays out that really could make the difference in the general particularly if there's not a serious third party option.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, I mean, this is where if you're an election-denying Republican who also was a little crazy and conspiratorial on stuff, you can drive your Republican vote down to 45 or 43 or something like that. And you can get pretty badly clobbered in Michigan and Pennsylvania. Most did a fair amount of work to try to get people to know how crazy these Republicans were. On the other hand, in Arizona, Kerry Lake was all of that, and got within 0.5%, I think, half a percentage point of winning. So the partisanship and polarization remained strong enough to overcome some of that. But I agree on the margin, it makes a huge difference. So talk about that there. I mean, so here we are, we're in this polarized country, education a very good, when you map the states, you do this in the memo... Education, with one or two exceptions really is a very good predictor of where the states are in terms of the polarization.

But there are a bunch in the middle both in terms of education, and in terms of actual vote performance in the last few cycles, the Pennsylvanias, and Michigans, Wisconsin, I guess Georgia, Arizona. They're a little different from each other, but they're all sort of in the middle in terms of educational achievement and are the swing states. So that doesn't change in the very near future. We have eight swing states and that's that. And they're fought bitterly, and they're single digit percentage, maybe 10% at most swing voters in them. Is that about right?

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well, that's probably a little bit more on swing voters. Yes, that's right. And so there was a popular saying amongst Democrats in the early part of the century, which was, "demography is destiny." So under that theory as young people, non-whites became a bigger and bigger percentage of politics in America, there was an inevitability that all the Sun Belt was going to move to the Democrats. And it hasn't quite played out that way, because, I think education's part of it... But you've seen in the last couple cycles that Republicans have done particularly well, Hispanic voters across the country, but particularly in Florida and Texas. So whereas 15 years ago, someone would tell you that it's inevitable that Florida and Texas become Democratic. I think Texas could be a few decades from now maybe before they become Democratic. But Republicans, if anything, are getting stronger in Florida.

But I think we're really down, if you're generous, to eight states that are competitive, and four of them are in the kind of 20th century manufacturing industrial belt, and four of them are in the Sun Belt. So you have Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and New Hampshire, which are much disproportionately higher percentage of people who live there are white, older, with the exception of New Hampshire, are kind of in the middle of that education level. And then you have North Carolina, Georgia, Arizona, and Nevada that are trending more democratic, but they're really at best 50/50. North Carolina is probably not even 50/50, and that's really where the battleground is. And so absent of Nevada, which is lower on the education, and [New] Hampshire, which is higher on education. And by the way, most people will tell you for the 2024 election that that eight states is a too-generous analysis, and most people, I think it's down to three or four states. But six of those eight states, the education levels are dead square in the middle of the country. And so I think the formula— and these are all razor-thin outcomes in these states, both in the presidential elections in the last two cycles, as well as the statewide races, particularly for Senate in the last couple cycles. So the secret in these states is going to be twofold. One is to build as much turnout as you can amongst your base voters based on education. So that's one of the secrets to Trump's success in 2020, was his ability to grow the turnout of less educated people in the industrial Midwest states in particular, who hadn't voted in 2016.

BILL KRISTOL:

And so if I can interrupt, and in 2016, this is in your memo. I mean, I remember in 2013, 14, is when Republicans were probably maxed out with the white working class. I mean, Romney was not naturally a great candidate for them maybe, but still. But Obama was not a great candidate on the other side. They went by, I think, 18 points among white working-class voters. And that's like a huge margin. And Trump doubled that to 36. As someone who— I'm for Biden next time if it's still Trump, that's for sure. You can't get even more of those white working-class voters to either vote or switch. There's more growth there than Democrats should be comfortable with. Don't you think?

DOUG SOSNIK:

There is, but I think you have to look at it twofold. One is turnout and then the other is how they vote. Biden marginally improved his performance in 2020 compared to Clinton in '16 on how they voted. But the big difference was Trump's ability to increase the turnout amongst these people who hadn't voted in 2016. So the formula for Republicans and Democrats, depending on the state, is how do you maximize this diploma divide, where for Trump is getting less educated voters to turn out. And for Democrats, it's getting more educated to turn out. But the other part of that is, because these states were so narrowly divided by lecture results, you can't ignore these swing voters. And we had the highest percentage of people who turned out in 2022, who self-described themselves as Independents, political independents. I think it's the highest level since 1980. 40% of the people in Arizona who voted in 2022 call themselves political independents. So I think you've got to have in these states that matter, you have to have a two track approach here. One is to maximize the diploma

divide based on where you are. But the other is you can't ignore the swing voters now. And Catalist did an analysis, which is the Democratic data firm, of the 2022 midterms, and they showed in their analysis how different non-competitive states and districts were in voting than these handful of places that are competitive, and that 17 million fewer people voted in the 2022 midterms compared to the 2018 midterms, which was a historic high. But in the competitive states, statewide, the turnout was actually higher than 2018. So when you're looking at—

BILL KRISTOL:
2022.

DOUG SOSNIK:
2022. So when you're looking at what's going to happen in 2024, don't look at the national polling. Biden beat Trump by over seven million votes. Biden's margins in California and New York was greater than his margin of victory nationally.

BILL KRISTOL:
Yeah, he won.

DOUG SOSNIK:
So, the national polls skew what's going on because you've got the extremes weighing in, but they have nothing to do, or not nothing to do, but they're not determinative of the outcome because it's down to these handful of states. That's all that matters. The 2016 polling nationally was accurate. It predicted Clinton's popular vote victory. What wasn't accurate [was] what was going on in the states. And that's the only place that matters are these eight states at most.

BILL KRISTOL:
It is striking. The turnout thing, which can be ridiculed easily, every political pro is asked who's going to win. Oh, it depends on turnout. Of course, it's kind of ludicrous. It's definitionally... It's like a tautology. But I do find talking to people who haven't been in, frankly in real campaigns, they don't quite focus. And the exit polls are bad this way because they give you percentages of every group's vote. But it is worth a lot more in politics. I'll say this in a very stupid and simple way just to... It's a lot more to win 60/40 among a million voters turning out in a certain category than to win 63/37 among, I'm just doing the math in my head, 750,000 voters turning out, right? What matters is the absolute gap that you're building up in the groups that are favorable to you and then minimizing the gap in the groups that are unfavorable to you.

That could be done by persuasion. You can switch some of those. You can go from 60/40 to 63/37. Or on either side, you can go from 37 to 40 or you can go from 60 to 63. That's important. But you also can just, if you can get more people to vote in those groups, it's so crucial. That is partly a mobilization thing, but also partly a persuasion thing. I'm curious on the education thing, just as a sidebar: So young voters are more Democratic and therefore young turnout, youthful turnout is big. But young voters also split on education, no? It's not as if every young voter turning out is not necessarily good for the Democrats, and same as you've been saying with minorities as well.

DOUG SOSNIK:
That's right. Well, let me talk broadly and then we'll talk more narrowly to young people. So broadly, there was a poll that came out in Gallup recently, which shows an increasing conservatism in America on social issues, a significant increase in the anti-woke view amongst

Americans. However, I think with young people, it's really a gating issue and particularly I think abortion is that for a lot of people.

Make no mistake about it, young people do not identify with Democrats. They identify our political system and our parties as broken just like everything else in our country. The Z's and millennials grew up with the belief in institutions are either one of two things. They're either broken or they're corrupt. And they have no faith or confidence in anybody in power in this country because for their entire life, all they remember is how these systems have failed them.

So the young people are not aligned for the Democratic Party. They are aligned against the Republican Party. That's largely driven by social issues and the issue of abortion for a lot of people. And remember that the Republican Party is being pulled further and further to the right. Gallup came down with a poll today. The highest percent of people in the history of polling, 69%, believe that abortion should be legal for the first three months. 69% now, the highest on record.

So as you see these states, 26 of them, I think, are controlled by Republicans. There's a race in a lot of these states to see who can be toughest on the issue of abortion. For those young people living there, it's going easy on how are they going to vote. That young turnout was higher, significantly higher in 2022 midterms than 2018 midterms.

You had three states, three bright red Republican states in 2022, West Virginia, Kansas, and Montana, that voted down referendums on abortion that would have limited access. So that's driving this young, the young voting is the extreme social positions. It's not just you're going to see some rulings this week or next week from the court on LGBTQ issues and other issues. That's a gating issue for a lot of young people.

Last thing I'll say is, and I tend to oversimplify and what I'm getting ready to say is not something that a lot of Democrats agree with, but I think about 40% of the country is "crazy left" and 40% are "crazy right," and 20% are what I call "civilians" who think that both sides are crazy. They disproportionately live in suburbs, by the way. Those are the people that are voting against whoever's in power. They're not voting for anybody.

So the tail of the tape, getting back to what I alluded to earlier, to be successful in this politics, is you have to have a two-track strategy. You have to get your 40%, whether you're a Democrat or Republican, you got to get your 40% crazy to turn out. You're not worried about how they're going to vote. You just got to make sure they turn out. But you can't ignore in these states that determine political power in our country. You can't ignore the 20% that think that both sides are crazy.

And so the 2022 election, and I'm speaking now as a Democrat obviously, and I didn't think it was going to be a very important election. I said, the day after, we're going to move on and no one's going to never know it happened. I think I was wrong about that. I thought that was the most positive election we've had probably since the beginning of the century. It reaffirmed my confidence in the American public. In the states that mattered across the board, they voted against crazy. Not a single election denier won a statewide election in the eight states that matter.

Now, understand that as they were voting for Democrats, a lot of them don't like Biden, think he's doing a terrible job, and 70% of them thought that the country's headed in the wrong direction. But they were looking for less crazy and more normalcy. And I think that was a powerful statement and I think that's going to be the backdrop for the 2024 election. And I think that there are tremendous, if you look at ...So Bill and I grew up where it was pretty simple, presidents running for election. Just tell me two things at the beginning of the election year. What's your job approval and what's the right track/wrong track? It's all you need to know.

Well, that doesn't matter anymore. Biden is in the low 40s right now in his job approval. You got 70% of the country that thinks we're headed in the wrong direction. But that's not what's going to determine the outcome. What's going to determine the outcome is going to be who's less crazy. There's tremendous trepidation that people have about Biden. They have trepidation about the job he's done. They have obviously real concerns that, I think, only increased about his age. They have real concerns, which I think have only increased about Harris as the VP.

So we're back to, as I mentioned earlier, eight out of nine the last elections, voters have voted for some form of change, and to the extent that the last election was not a change election, although the Republicans did take the House back. I think it's now about who's less crazy. That's really much more, I think, going to be the tail of the tape than Biden's job approval, right track/wrong track. Remember now, these eight states represent only 19% of the US population.

So 81% of the United States, 81% of the population in the United States, how they vote, whether they vote, will have no impact on who's going to be the next President of the United States.

BILL KRISTOL:

Amazing. So let's get to... Well, you brought us very well to 2024. So let me just pepper you with a few questions about that, both predictive and also then what advice you'd give to either party. You can make yourself give advice to Republicans in some theoretical world. So are we looking at a Biden/Trump race? Do you think that's almost a done deal, absent medical events obviously?

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well, I'll tell you just a quick family story. So last year, I wrote an op-ed that The Times was willing to— wanted to run. The op-ed said that I didn't believe in the general election in 2024. I didn't believe Biden would be on the ticket. I didn't believe Harris would be on the ticket. I didn't believe Trump would be on the ticket. I didn't believe Pence would be on the ticket. Well, ultimately my family persuaded me not to run that op-ed. And I still actually think that op-ed might be right, but I certainly have less confidence in that outcome now than I did a year ago when I wrote but did not publish that. I just have a sense... Let me put it differently. There's never been a time in my political life where I've ever seen on paper, two front-runners that are further in front and seem to be more certain to be the nominee than we have now. I've also never seen, in that period of time, more uncertainty about both of them and their ability to get from mid-June of '13 to the ballot box in November of '14. I've never felt more uncertain about-

BILL KRISTOL:

'24.

DOUG SOSNIK:

'24. I've never felt more uncertain about their viability to get from here to there.

BILL KRISTOL:

That's so well said. I've had the exact same reaction, which is analytically you show me an incumbent president who has no serious challenger, you show me the out-party with someone who's won the nomination twice running above 50%. Those two are highly, highly, highly likely to be the nominees. But my instinct, my gut, the country doesn't want a Biden/Trump rematch so instinctively or whatever the right word is for that is, temperamentally almost. John Sears, whom you knew Reagan's top strategist used to have

this nice term about appropriateness, that somehow the nominee is often someone who the country judges is appropriate for the times. He used this to say that Reagan, who many people thought couldn't win in 1980, would win the nomination or the general. He thought no, there was enough unhappiness with Carter and so forth and liberal policies that Reagan had become appropriate in '80 in a way he hadn't been in '76.

So, by Clinton in '92 I'd make the same case. Someone who we thought in the Bush White House, come on. Draft-dodger, 43-year-old governor of Arkansas against the guy who had helped preside over the successful end of the Cold War. But he was appropriate for the post-Cold War era. I don't feel either Biden or Trump were exactly appropriate for 2024. But I also analytically, it's hard to see that either won't be the nominee. So I guess-

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well—

BILL KRISTOL:

But I don't know.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well, I would just say just, too. Can I just-

BILL KRISTOL:

Please, yeah,

DOUG SOSNIK:

Since you and I are taking the spin down memory lane with—

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, right.

DOUG SOSNIK:

... people on this call or Zoom who probably weren't even born. What was true in both the Clinton 1980 campaign and the Bush '92 campaign was the fact-

BILL KRISTOL:

Reagan '80. Yeah.

DOUG SOSNIK:

I'm sorry. Reagan '80. If you look at their vote in January of their election year, whether it was '80 or '92, I'd say by June, what their head-to-head vote was in both of those elections was reflected in their vote on election day. So in other words, their vote never changed. The anti-Carter, anti-Bush vote, all it did was to get closer to election, which it normally does, is consolidate—

BILL KRISTOL:

Right.

DOUG SOSNIK:

...around one person who's not the incumbent.

BILL KRISTOL:

The undecideds broke against Carter and against right Bush, which was predictable in that era.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well, in '80 though, particularly in '80, you had the anti-Carter split between split between Anderson and Reagan until the end and then it all just rolled in. But the second thing, which I think ties back into the topic here of this discussion, is you're right about appropriateness and what the country's looking for. So then how do you explain why we are where we are? The answer is because of the architecture of American politics, divisions in our country and how we have sorted ourselves out, that is what's driving, at least today, the probable horse race or choices next November of 70% of the country is saying in polling, they don't want a Biden/Trump rematch. So how do you explain why this is where it is? The answer is because the architecture of our politics is so strong that it overrides everything, including having two nominees that no one wants.

BILL KRISTOL:

I guess one question, and this really is, who knows, right, is that architecture is very strong until the moment it maybe just cracks. So is it possible, it seems unlikely before November 24th, but maybe I've always wondered in the four years after that or something, you could really get a big enough change that suddenly this realignment goes in a different direction. But I think you've captured so well what this rolling realignment over the last 30, 40 years has been. Let me ask. So let's assume for now. Well, go ahead.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Let me say one thing on that. As you know, Bill, when you give a speech, there are three rules. You have to show up on time, you shouldn't offend the host, and it would be nice to leave people on a positive note.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right.

DOUG SOSNIK:

So I have an impeccable record of showing up on time. I have a mixed record on not offending the host. I had to really work to try to figure out how to end on a positive note. I finally came up with something that I actually believe in. It took me a long time and I do believe it. So the question is: Is where we are forever? If it's not, when's it going to change and why is it going to change?

And My answer is it's not going to happen... We're not going to be in this place forever. We're in a transition. As I mentioned several times now, we're going in this hinge moment of history and we're transitioning from one era to another. As you saw in the shift to an industrial society, it took several decades before more people felt it, but they do feel it. They do feel the change. You're seeing how we're changing our system now of qualifications for jobs and not using a college degree as a proxy and giving people the right training. So that's going to help on that.

Secondly, the country is at some... I believe when Trump was president and having to speak in front of a Democratic group, I'd say to them, "If you're not happy right now, tough because you didn't do anything about it, and Trump won." So at some point we have as a country right now, the country we deserve, the leadership. Until the people in this country do something about it and stop rewarding this behavior, we're going to have more of this. Now I believe, though, that the country will get fed up because they're not aligned with either party. So that's going to happen.

The third thing is, I allude to it, I'm not going to get into details, is we're changing the reward system where all of a sudden, moderate's going to be more important. But the last thing I think most importantly is going to be the demographic changes in our country, when basically the baby boomers die off and are still clinging to the last remnants of power and the millennials and Generation Z voters take over.

I'm actually quite optimistic about what our country's going to look like at that point. I think that they're much more like the greatest generation, they're much more communitarian. They're not invested in either of these political parties. People keep saying, "Well, if 70% of the country worries about climate change and 70% of the country believes we ought to have more gun control, and why haven't these things changed?" The answer is because the people aren't voting on that. But as you see, the dying off generationally of the people who've been hanging onto the old system and this emerging generation takes over political power in our country and they are now the majority by numbers of voting, you're going to see a complete change in our politics.

But I think that's more likely to be in the next decade to really feel it than it is in this decade. So now you can say in a sense, we've had nothing but chaos in American politics since the 2000 election and the Supreme Court ruling on Bush versus Gore. You can say it's really been nothing but chaos for the last 23 years, and in fact, it's true. And if you assume we're going to have that chaos for the next say into this decade, which it probably will, that's 30 years. Well, if you take the sweep of history, 30 years is really not a long time. So, we are in the middle. I think we're closer to the end now than the beginning of this phase. And I am optimistic we're going to come out on the other side, but I still think we're going to be in this period for several more cycles.

BILL KRISTOL:

I hope we are closer to the end. And also, of course, a lot of damage can be done in these "in between" periods unless it's constrained. The guardrails have to hold somewhat. My version of this, just 30 seconds, is it sounds like our speeches are quite similar. I also try to be on time, and I also don't really do a very good job of obeying the "Leave us with the upbeat thought." But my version of this is from '60 to '80 when I was seven years old, I guess, till when I came, got my PhD and all this, began teaching, American politics featured no successful two term presidencies, no full two term presidencies. Nixon was the only one who even got reelected. It featured assassinations, it featured riots, it featured a failed war in Vietnam with pretty bad consequences here and God knows in Cambodia, horrible consequences in Vietnam itself, and so forth.

People were writing articles in the late '70s, very intelligent observers, political scientists, the no one can be a successful president, the whole system is totally broken, we need to have a parliamentary system, we've got to get rid of the constitution. It wasn't crazy to have all those concerns. America is in decline, that was huge in the late '70s.

From '80 to 2016, again, whatever one thinks, there were many problems in that era, we had basically a 12-year Reagan/Bush presidency and then three eight-year presidencies. Suddenly, everyone is getting reelected. Suddenly, we win the Cold War. It doesn't feel— thank God there are assassination attempts early on but then we get beyond that, and then it changed abruptly, actually. It wasn't like everyone is sitting around in 1979/'80, saying, "Okay, we're at the end of this era of 20 years of chaos and so forth and now we're going to enter, in a way, a more placid or—you could even argue successful—political era." That's complicating cuts both ways.

Anyway, these things do change kind of suddenly and unpredictably I think—

DOUG SOSNIK:

If I can unpack them, I agree with what you said. If I can unpack why, I would just say quickly, the '60 to '80 period was the transition, a demographic transition in our country to the Baby Boomers taking over. That was what caused a fair amount of that.

Secondly, if you look to the sweep of history, we had, and there's an economics professor named Gordon out of Northwestern who wrote about this, we had unparalleled growth in this country. Unparalleled growth economically, that has never been seen since the beginning of civilization and so that enables all kinds of things to happen.

The cultural transition, though, from the takeover of the Baby Boomers from the Greatest Generation is what really fueled a lot of that '60 to '80 period, the turmoil-

BILL KRISTOL:

The civil rights and feminism and so forth. Yeah.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Yes, which is all part of the Baby Boomers. Then the 1980 to 2016 was we had a deal since World War Two, basically, between the parties, I think there two things that drove here. One, they had a deal, we've got 4% GDP growth, then everybody is like, "We're okay with everybody. We can disagree on foreign policy." But the compact we had as a country, political leaders was, basically, as long as we have good economic growth, we all have investments in the system and let's not rock the boat.

Now the other factor though is the country doesn't trust either political party and other than Bush, who essentially ran for a Reagan third term in '88, the country has shown that basically since Roosevelt, they don't want any party to be in power more than eight years.

And so, the GDP growth decline, the unevenness of it, is what stopped it. You know I said that McCain was the only person to lose to Bush twice, he lost in 2000 and there's no way the country is going to vote for a third Bush term in 2008, and I don't think the country was ready to vote for a third Obama term in 2016.

So I think those are the underlying factors of those meta trends that you're talking about.

BILL KRISTOL:

No. That's right. That's actually important and interesting. Biden calls you in and maybe he has called you in but he's ...Let's assume we are in the world we're in and nothing radical or dramatic changes in terms of the actual people on the ticket or the tickets themselves I suppose. What can Democrats, but particularly the Biden administration, do to improve their chances in '24 and then what about the Republicans? What advice would you give each party in your magic five minutes with their leaders? Insofar as they even have leaders these days.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well, if I were in the Biden White House and I had some familiarity having done this for six years in the Clinton White House, if you're a staffer, you have to look at who your principle is, who they are, who they're not, what they're good at, what they're not good at, what's the situation, how do you maximize your strengths and minimize their weaknesses?

For the Biden White House, I would do a lot of what they're doing and a bit mor of it. So the first thing is much like Reagan, this is a very controlled White House. There's very little spontaneity, everything is scripted, if you look at Biden's schedule in terms of the number of hours per day that he's working and the number of public events, they're very limited. Very much like Reagan's second term.

I would keep a very controlled environment. I would spend a lot more time right now focusing on the "Harris problem" and what I would do with Harris is... I believe, by the way... No one says this, I believe when you look at how narrowly Biden won in 2020, you can point to

anything and say that made the difference. I believe Harris helped get Biden elected. I think she made a difference. I think she held her own on the debate. She created energy out there. She got a better turnout amongst some of the targeted voters. She was good on the stump.

And so I would have Harris full-time on the road. I would have her out amongst friendly audiences, both to jazz them up and to also build her up and give her more self-confidence. The way that I would build the White House... They do it but I'd do much more of it, and have her do a lot of this, is every event where they go, they need to go somewhere at the scene of an accomplishment of the administration where they've made people's better, and infrastructure package is probably the best.

I would go to that scene, I would have someone introduce Biden and Harris, I would have them talk about the fact we wouldn't be here today except for what these people did and how it's going to impact the local community.

I would then have Harris or Biden get up there and say, "It's really gracious. I really appreciate that. I'm here today not to talk about what we've accomplished but I want to talk about the future." and that's how I would drive the entire White House operation. I would have the principles stay completely clear of Trump, and they're doing this, I might add, and I would stay on that.

But now the analogy I use in the Biden ... In the Clinton '96 reelect, we never announced he was running for reelection formally. I mean at least say open the window at two o'clock in the morning in the middle of March and just say, "I'm running" and shut the window and we'll be done with it.

I want him to be president as long as possible and not a candidate, because when you're president, the country thinks you're working on their problems. When you're a candidate, they think you're trying to keep your job.

So I would keep him presidential as long as possible, and I would have it all built around people's lives have changed, because of what they've done and I would particularly put Harris in the high growth states of the eight states of North Carolina, probably Arizona, Georgia and Nevada, and I would have Biden spending more time in the Rust Belt states.

And so to me, it's relatively easy... And I'd take advantage of... You got to figure out how to manage... In the last CNN poll, Biden is only getting 60% of the Democratic vote in the primary, 40% of the vote is either going to Kennedy, Williamson, or nobody. So that's not great.

You got to figure out how in the Biden White House, you're going to manage not having a primary but also not creating these benchmarks, which demonstrate weakness.

To me, and maybe it's my background, maybe it's dealing with an incumbent, [inaudible] the analogy I always use, and this is what I would use in the Biden White House is a duck. If you think about a duck, above the water, very placid and below it, very, very paddling, frenetic activity.

The White House should be a duck, which is above the water, very calm, very presidential, and not political. Beneath the surface should be frenetic activity, as partisan and political as possible without getting caught, and that should be driving everything.

I would extend that all the way through until whoever the Republican nominee is has physically captured enough delegates to be the official nominee. I would extend the nomination process as long as possible and try to create an implicit, not explicit contrast out of the White House with how they're not crazy.

Anyway, to me, it's much more straightforward in terms of what to do. On the Republican side-

BILL KRISTOL:

Let me just ask on the Democratic side for a second. Was I crazy a year ago to... I may well have been, because most of my Democratic friends thought I was, to say that I thought the Democrats could be better off with a generational transition with Biden being a successful one-term president, George Washington says [inaudible], "I've done what I came here to do, restore and save democracy, restore the country, got us out of the pandemic, okay, we're running a competent foreign policy, I'm stepping aside, there will be a vigorous primary but we're a strong country, we want to have a vigorous primary, a real debate among the next generation, blah, blah, blah."

I was for that, I guess. I said I was, at least, open to it and the White House wasn't happy and I got the same phone calls, that five people, like you used to make in 1995 telling people not to even speculate about a challenge to Clinton and so forth. Am I wrong that that might have worked or was it just too risky and you just need to run the incumbent?

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well, if any of you are sports fans and you have a team that's not winning a lot, there's always the question is you sit there, do we make extreme measures of change for the long-term or do we take the short-term and try to figure out how to get through it? What is the path? If you look in sports, the teams that are least successful are the ones that try to do both.

So, as Yogi Berra would say, "when you get to a fork in the road, take it." So, I actually think you're right and the Biden White House is right. What do I mean by that? I think in the short-term, staying the course is a better path.

I think in the long-term, the party is probably better off taking their medicine now.

BILL KRISTOL:

But not if it makes Trump president. In that respect, I agree with the Biden people.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well, look, if Trump is the nominee-

BILL KRISTOL:

Let's get to the Republicans. You were about to talk about them.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Wait, just real quick: the most successful candidates right now in this environment is to run someone who is beige. For any office. Not have a strong record, not be divisive, make it a referendum on the other person. And so you say, who can that be?

The answer is you have no idea until you go through the process and see who can survive the process. Anyway, the Republicans, which is much more difficult for me to... Usually, I love talking about Republicans and not Democrats, so I don't have to deal with our problems. But go ahead.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. Biden is the beige candidate, in a funny way, right? If you can make it about Trump and not pay the price for 70% wrong track and stuff, which maybe in this era you don't pay the price that God knows George H.W. Bush did pay, let's say, for that. Maybe Biden ends up being a perfectly good candidate and it just replicates 2020, basically.

What makes me nervous is that could he replicate 2016? That is if people want change, as you said, and they kind of forgot how bad Trump was, and they remind themselves that Biden is older and so forth, that Biden becomes a little more of a ... And this possible no-labels kind of third party activity, could we have a 2016 election instead of a 2020 election. That's what

makes me nervous, as someone who would prefer Trump not become president again. That makes me nervous about the 2024.

DOUG SOSNIK:

I'd say two things that are completely conflicting. One is Trump put out a video about two or three weeks ago, which was really a referendum on his presidency versus Biden's and it was used in all kinds of economic numbers and other things.

It was a pretty compelling... You could see the contours were pretty damn compelling narrative that Trump could put out on the choice for the American public. But the other issue that I alluded to earlier is if you tell me... Again, I like to oversimplify. There are only three things I care about in a campaign, I care about defining what this campaign is about, I care about defining my candidate, and I care about defining the opposition. Those are the only things I care about.

If what defined a 2022 campaign was we're voting against crazy, if that's going to be the driver on defining what this campaign is about in 2024, the Democrats are going to win. I don't care if ... I don't think it matters who they nominate. But it's obviously far from clear, whether or not if it's Trump, if his ad from three weeks ago that defines the campaign, that's going to be a difficult campaign for Democrats. If it's about crazy in our democracy, then Democrats will win.

BILL KRISTOL:

What do you think is more likely?

DOUG SOSNIK:

The latter.

BILL KRISTOL:

Crazy—

DOUG SOSNIK:

Crazy.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. Too much craziness there [inaudible]. The indictments, just final, final question, matter much? Don't matter much? Make Trump look a little more unacceptable to some swing voters?

DOUG SOSNIK:

I think matter much. I think it matters much to primary, probably to Trump's benefit. It matters much in the general. I think much more to the benefit of the Democrats. Particularly, amongst... If in these eight states that matter, you can get a 20% Republican Party defection to vote for Biden, that's enormous. We have to remember this is not a stationary kind of thing here. We're at the middle of June. The campaign hasn't really started yet. When you see a race in the Republican race for president and you see the positions of these guys... DeSantis is riding to the right of Trump. Well, Trump is really not right or left. He's just Trump.

But if you look at all the crazy Trump stuff, all the people that defend him, all the stuff that they're saying to defend him, which makes no sense, a race to the right on the rest of the field, it's going to make it... I think it's going to increase the probability that crazy is going to drive the 2024 election.

BILL KRISTOL:

Very interesting. That's really a good way of putting it I think, and not quite the conventional way of putting it but a very helpful way of putting it. Final words? Anything we didn't cover, we should cover, for people to try to understand both what's been happening for the last three or four decades and where we are now?

DOUG SOSNIK:

I don't. Although, I'll just reinforce what I said earlier. I think, particularly, if you're younger, I think that you're living through an incredibly historic period of time, that when you're our age and look back at it, you're going to probably even appreciate more than you do now how historic this moment in history is, and so I just would say to you to reinforce to you how high the stakes are right now in our elections.

BILL KRISTOL:

I think that's well-said. Doug Sosnik, thank you for joining me for this I found very interesting and stimulating conversation today. I really appreciate it.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Thank you.

BILL KRISTOL:

Thank you all for joining us on *Conversations*.