

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Whit Ayres Conversation

July 12, 2023

BILL KRISTOL:

Hi, welcome back to *Conversations*. I'm Bill Kristol, and I'm very pleased to be joined again by Whit Ayres, the veteran Republican pollster and strategist. Whit's been involved in presidential campaigns, a ton of state and Senate and governor and local campaigns over the last three decades. Really one of the most respected, and correctly so, analysts of our current political situation, as well as someone who's been so involved in electoral politics. Also served in state government at a high level in South Carolina, and a PhD in political science. I always like to mention that, Whit, so one of the rare PhD in political science who actually has done something useful over the years. So that's the way I look at it. Anyway, Whit, thanks for joining me again.

WHIT AYRES:

Sure, Bill. Good to be with you again.

BILL KRISTOL:

And our last conversation was November, about three weeks after the election, November 2022. And really it stands up well, and it's worth people going back to look at if they wish, if they want to, but you stressed the "invisible primary," that phrase that's been around political circles for a while, and that that would be what 2023 was. There are no actual votes cast until, I think they just scheduled Iowa for, what, mid-January I think, January 15th, 2024. So votes were cast in November '22, votes will be cast in the primary in January '24, but this invisible primary has been key for the presidential races in both parties, the nomination races, over the last several decades. And you called attention to it and said we should see what happens, and you laid out some of the things that could happen. So we're halfway through the invisible primary, basically. It's halfway through 2023, halfway between November '22 and January '24. And, well, what's happened? What have we learned?

WHIT AYRES:

Well, we've learned that different elements of the invisible primary have gone in different directions. The Republican state committees seem to be wholly in Donald Trump's pocket. He has taken over those committees, taken over much of the Republican National Committee, so that we have not seen changes in the structure of primaries, for example, to go to proportional primaries, so that if you get a third of the primary vote, you get a third of the delegates. We still have an awful lot of states that are winner take all, so you get 35% of the vote, as Donald Trump is very likely to do, you got 100% of the delegates. The donors on the other hand have gone the other direction...

BILL KRISTOL:

And just on the state primaries, since you mentioned that. You mentioned that in November, and I hadn't really thought much about that, but I think it's... It shows you've been through this rodeo a few times, and it reflects your experience and how important that is. And you said, if the establishment wants to weaken Donald Trump, they'll move from the either winner take all state primaries, or even, I suppose, winner take all by Congressional district, to a more proportional representation. That would be a signal that the Republican National Committee and the state committees and those who influence them are doing things behind the scenes, even if it wouldn't be headlines, to slow down, let's say, Trump's momentum, make it more competitive. And I hadn't, as I say, thought as much about the committees. Everyone talks about the donors. We'll get to that in a second. But it is the dog that hasn't barked, right?

WHIT AYRES:

Exactly.

BILL KRISTOL:

I mean, has there been any... You follow this closely, I don't, but has there been any effort to...

WHIT AYRES:

No. No, no. The official committees are wholly in Donald Trump's pocket, and they're not going to do anything, at least overtly, that would in any way diminish his ability to win the Republican nomination.

BILL KRISTOL:

And they haven't done much covertly either, so far as we can tell.

WHIT AYRES:

Right. Exactly.

BILL KRISTOL:

Okay. Well then, what about other Republican elites, elected officials, donors, influential conservative types?

WHIT AYRES:

Well, a great many elected officials have remained silent, particularly on the Senate side. But those from hardcore deep red districts in the house tend to be lining up behind Donald Trump. Their voters say they want Trump, so they have followed that direction. I don't know that the elected officials are that critical, but they are a portion of this invisible primary. The donors, on the other hand, have gone the other direction. They are actively searching for an alternative to Donald Trump. They believe that he's very likely to lose the presidential election in 2024, and they're really interested in finding an alternative. They haven't settled on one yet. They thought for a moment it might be Ron DeSantis, but that seems to be fading. So they're out there looking for someone else, and we'll see if someone captures their attention and can generate substantial financial resources behind their campaign.

BILL KRISTOL:

I'm a little surprised the donors haven't... Not that they needed to consolidate behind anyone, but even consolidate semi-publicly, you might say, behind an effort to stop Trump. But I don't feel that that's happened much either, that even the donors who were, as you say, less acquiescent to Trump perhaps than these other groups, or less intimidated, I suppose, by voters, who we'll get to in a second, themselves. But I don't know. I feel like they could have done more, right? We could have publicized meetings of 25 donors, or 25 elected Republican senators for that matter, where they don't support one person, but they agreed that they will reconvene, I'm making this up obviously, in October, to see who's competitive against Trump, and to support that candidate. Maybe that's happening way behind the scenes. I don't know.

WHIT AYRES:

Well, there have been forums, Karl Rove put together one in Texas, where many candidates, but not Donald Trump, were invited. But really, I think the donors are waiting to see what the voters have to say about it. The voters particularly in Iowa and New Hampshire. They're looking to see if someone pops in one of the early states, so that they don't play their hand too early. So, we'll see. But there's no question that the donors are skeptical about Trump's ability to win. They think he carries way too much baggage, and they'd really like to win, and they're really looking for someone to rally around.

BILL KRISTOL:

But do you worry, or let's just say, think that they could be waiting and waiting, and meanwhile...

WHIT AYRES:

Sure.

BILL KRISTOL:

Trump's lead remains at 30 points, and they're sitting around having a meeting the day after Iowa, and Trump's won by 15 points, and it's like, now what do we do?

WHIT AYRES:

Yep. That's entirely possible.

BILL KRISTOL:

Well, let's talk about the voters, who are important in this process, and perhaps more than the media sometimes realize, do influence the donors, not just the other way around. I was very [inaudible]— I looked it up just this morning. So when we spoke in November and you talked about the invisible primary, you were, I think, open to the possibility that Trump might not be the nominee. I think you might still be open to that. We'll talk about that in a second, and walk through how that could happen.

In November, if you just look at the average of the polls, and there wasn't that much polling in late November '22 as much as there is today, in the Republican primary nationally, it was about Trump 50% DeSantis 27%, then everyone else way behind, Pence at 7%, Nikki Haley at 3%. This morning, as we speak on July 12th, at least one

compilation has Trump at 53%, so up from 50% to 53%, but basically unchanged. DeSantis at 21%, a little bit of a dip, he had that little rally and then dipped back down again. DeSantis down some, still clearly in second. Pence at 6% as opposed to 7%. Nikki Haley at 4% as opposed to 3%. It's actually been a bizarre... I don't know. It feels to me, and again, you've been closer to this than I have, that most of these invisible primary years, someone starts to move, and things do change a little bit. In a weird way for all the drama, it's been one of most static invisible primary years that I remember.

WHIT AYRES:

Yeah. Yeah. Ron DeSantis had a little bump after his 18-point victory in Florida, which had been a swing state before. And so he really jumped up in a number of polls, including one that we did back the first part of the year. But he has since faded. And as you said, he's down a little bit in the various averages, so it's not at all sure that he's going to be the alternative. He may still be, but he has some challenges, and he's gone backwards rather than forwards since he announced.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. That is striking. And I just... What do you make therefore of the fact that Trump, he's been indicted twice this year, he's had various people break with him, Bill Barr and others who were reasonably loyal, sort of, who certainly served closely with him, let's say, and defended him in many, many cases in 2018, 2019, 2020. Chris Christie, who supported and worked with him in his reelection, is out attacking him. So far, it hasn't really budged anything. What does that tell us about the Republican Party? Without assuming that this still could... And then we'll get to the question of, I suppose, how likely is this to change? But as of now, one could look at these numbers and say, boy, that's looks pretty baked in, that Trump 50%.

WHIT AYRES:

Yeah, it does. I am not convinced that it is. I believe the last time I was with you, we talked about the three different factions in the Republican Party. The Never Trump faction is only about 10% or 12%, and they've never supported Trump, they're appalled the fact that he took over the party. The "Always Trump" faction is about 35%, somewhere around one third. They're not going anywhere. They're going to vote for Donald Trump, regardless of who's against him. They will brook no criticism of him. They can't stand anybody taking a shot at him. A majority of the party, about 55%, are "Maybe Trump" voters, people who voted for him twice, would vote for him against Joe Biden in a heartbeat, but who are at least open to an alternative. But they have yet to find the alternative that they can rally around.

After the first Alvin Bragg indictment in New York, they took a look at that and said, "Wait a minute, this is a ridiculous case. You're taking a state law, linking it to a federal law over which Bragg has no authority, in order to elevate a misdemeanor to a felony. You have a case brought by a prosecutor who boasted when he was running for prosecutor that he had sued the Trump administration more than 100 times." This is a very, very easy case for Republicans to dismiss as a partisan witch hunt. And they did, I think rightly, frankly. And so, the maybe Trump voters saw no real serious charges in that, and it looked like a Democrat trying to get famous.

On the other hand, the Jack Smith indictment on the classified documents is a serious matter of 37 felony counts backed up by a mountain of evidence. And the reaction of those maybe Trump voters... Of course, they always Trump voters are going to say it's just a partisan witch hunt and Biden out to get him, blah, blah, blah, blah. The Maybe Trump voters reacted like they might if one of their kids got arrested for a DUI. You know he did wrong. You know it was not a good thing to do. But he's family, and so you rally around him, you get the best lawyer you can, you don't want this charge to ruin his life. And so because he's family, you got to support him, even though you don't defend what he did. And that's where a lot of those Maybe Trump voters are right now. That doesn't mean they're committed to Trump and will stick with him through thick and thin. We don't know. They might. But if an alternative emerges, they're at least open to it.

I'm not at all sure that Donald Trump will win the Iowa caucuses. There's a whole lot I'm not sure about. The one thing I am sure about is that, if Donald Trump loses the Iowa caucuses, he will say it's stolen, just like he did in 2016 when Ted Cruz beat him. But that's the only thing I'm sure about. He's out there attacking the wildly popular Republican governor with an 86% job approval rating among Republicans, because she has decided to stay neutral. I'm not sure that's a real smart move. Wait till he gets to New Hampshire and Chris Sununu, the governor there, endorses somebody else. What's he going to say about Chris Sununu? So, I'm not at all sure that Trump wins the Iowa caucuses. He might, but I'm not willing to bet the house on it at this point.

BILL KRISTOL:

We'll come right back to Iowa and New Hampshire, since that's obviously a key question mark or key known unknown, I guess, about places where things could change. I mean, that has happened in the past so many times, really. But just for now, if I do the math right, basically, I think it's very interesting. So a third, let's just say, of the party is Always Trump, they're still for Trump. A third of the Maybe Trump are "Right Now for Trump," it seems like, if you just do the math. And then the other two thirds are... So another third's for DeSantis maybe, and then the others are splintered. And then the never Trump people are presumably for Christie or Asa Hutchinson, or a little bit for perhaps Pence and Haley and Scott.

So I guess the question is, what moves those Maybe... Those Maybe Trump voters are... I think your point's a good one in the sense that people are so fatalistic, I think too much so a little bit, about Trump being the nominee. He's not got a majority right now of the Maybe Trump vote. He has a huge base, which gives him a big advantage.

WHIT AYRES:

No, exactly. He's got a huge base with winner-take-all primaries, which puts him in the driver's seat right now.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. Which is why it was important that you began with that. I mean, that's underrated... Everyone looks at the national polls and oh, DeSantis is down four points and this and that. But those winner-take-all primaries make a big difference, if you have the base, and if you keep that third of the Maybe Trump voters.

One more word, just on the current, let's call it the sociology almost, of the Republican Party. It is striking, the Maybe Trump voters are different from the always Trump voters in terms of just who they are, right? I mean, in terms of their... [inaudible]

WHIT AYRES:

Exactly. Much more likely to be establishment Republicans from the past, people who voted for Bush and McCain and Romney before Trump came along.

BILL KRISTOL:

And in terms of education, there's a pretty big gap, right? The Always Trump voters are less college— fewer college educated. I mean, how big is that gap?

WHIT AYRES:

Oh, it's huge. I mean, Donald Trump won non-college white voters by an overwhelming margin, and they favor him by an overwhelming margin today. It's the college educated white voters in the Republican primary, many of whom live in suburbs, who are most resistant to him, and are at least interested in an alternative.

BILL KRISTOL:

And if I remember this right, the percentage of Republican primary voters who are college educated has gone down compared to the non-college over the last...

WHIT AYRES:

Correct.

BILL KRISTOL:

You could win the Republican nomination with doing okay with non-college, but very well with college. Now you need... Now it's the opposite. If you do very well with non-college, as Trump is doing, you just need to keep some of the college educated. Is that right?

WHIT AYRES:

That's right. That's right, yeah. We're running our polls now at about 60% non-college, 40% college among Republican primary voters. And that seems pretty close to what's happened in recent elections.

BILL KRISTOL:

But I think it was more like 50/50 maybe ten years ago.

WHIT AYRES:

Right. Exactly.

BILL KRISTOL:

Well, that's a pretty big... If you're Trump and you have a solid base with the 60% who are non-college, almost by definition, you're going to be pretty formidable.

WHIT AYRES:

Exactly. Exactly.

BILL KRISTOL:

Well, I want to, I guess, get to the horse race side of it with the other candidates, but let's just take a minute. You mentioned Iowa and New Hampshire. What are the things to look for over the next six months? Well, over the rest of the invisible primary, I suppose, and then the actual visible primary, which begins with Iowa and New Hampshire. Where could it change? Where could we not have this static Trump 50%, DeSantis, low twenties, and everyone else in single digits? What things could... Obviously there could be "unknown unknowns." Is that what Rumsfeld said? What are the things that you look for or wonder about happening in the next six months?

WHIT AYRES:

The debates are important. The debates are a way for some of these also-ran candidates to become the candidates that people keep an eye on. The real question is going to be whether Donald Trump's even going to show up for the debates. He's talking about maybe skipping the first one. Chris Christie is absolutely convinced that he will not be able to avoid the spotlight in subsequent ones, even if he misses the first ones, but we'll see. But the debates have always been important, especially for those donors we were talking about, looking for an alternative to see if there's someone that they could get behind.

Whether or not Donald Trump participates is another one, not just in the debates, but in various events. I could see him basically blowing off many of the events in Iowa. Say, "Well, if that Governor Reynolds is going to remain neutral, I'm not going to go play in that state." And assume that he has a big enough lead to survive blowing off Iowa. It didn't work in 2016, he lost Iowa. But how much Donald Trump participates is going to be a big deal. So the debates and Donald Trump's participation in not only the debates, but the rest of the events, is going to be important.

Another thing that'll be important is who does well in the "living room to living room" campaigning, which has become a staple of both Iowa and New Hampshire. Ron DeSantis is very talented in many ways, but that living room to living room, make friends, impress people, is not his strong suit. So we'll see if he can overcome that. But the folks in Iowa and New Hampshire are pretty stubbornly independent and they frequently go against the grain of national polling. So, we'll see if somebody can gain a foothold there that they don't have right now.

BILL KRISTOL:

And the other thing that occurs to me is I guess indictments. There'll be another-

WHIT AYRES:

Exactly.

BILL KRISTOL:

In Georgia and federal indictment, I suppose, for January 6th. Do you think that has some chance to make more of a difference than the one so far?

WHIT AYRES:

Well, Bill, we're talking about something that's never ever happened in American politics before. Most of the time we get our insights by looking at precedent and see what's happened as a result of various events in the past, and we have absolutely nothing to base this on. So the bottom line is I have no idea, and frankly, neither does anybody else. I do think that the Fani Willis's indictment is likely to come down in August. The importance of that is not just the strength of the case, but the fact that if Donald Trump should get elected in 2024, he'll try to pardon himself for any federal crimes, but he couldn't pardon himself for state crimes, which could be a factor down the road. I don't know if Jack Smith is going to indict on January 6th, but I tell you, if you read that indictment on the classified documents, you will be impressed with the strength of the evidence and the seriousness of the charges.

Now, a lot of Republicans are just going to dismiss that as a partisan witch hunt, but anyone who actually looks at the evidence is realizing that if Donald Trump had just given back the documents when the feds first asked for them, he wouldn't have been charged just like Biden wasn't charged and Pence wasn't charged, and Trump was not charged on any of the documents he voluntarily gave back. He was charged with trying to keep the classified information and hiding it from the feds and hiding it from his own lawyer. And those are serious, serious charges, and we'll see if there is indeed a trial before the primaries what effect it has.

It tells me something that his lawyers have tried to postpone that trial until after the 2024 election. Think about it. If Donald Trump were sure he could beat the rap, he'd want a quick trial. He'd want to be able to say, "See, this was a witch hunt. They came after me and I beat the rap and I was found not guilty by a jury of my peers." If he really thought that he'd want a quick trial by postponing this or trying to postpone it as long as he can, he knows he's got a real challenge with that classified documents case.

BILL KRISTOL:

He probably, I mean, the lawyers I talked to think he can postpone it at least into 2024, which would get him past the beginning of the primaries at least, and maybe past the heart of the primary season. I mean, final point of that, I just want to go through the candidates. Iowa, New Hampshire, I mean, where are you on the spectrum of: it's a different world we live in, Biden lost them both overwhelmingly and won the nomination... Trump lost Iowa and did fine in New Hampshire. All the momentum stuff was a creature of a different time or it still matters a ton and that if Trump wins one or both, it's a wildly different world from if he loses one or certainly both.

WHIT AYRES:

I completely agree with your latter statement: They still matter a ton. Donald Trump's aura is built on his invincibility in Republican primaries and with the Republican electorate. If he loses both Iowa and New Hampshire, it's a different world. He could still come back and win South Carolina like Joe Biden, who lost Iowa and New Hampshire in won South Carolina. But if he should lose Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina, then I think his aura of invincibility has been punctured badly. And I

don't know what's going to happen then, but I think those first three states are absolutely critical.

BILL KRISTOL:

So let's talk in a minute about, yeah, let's go candidate by candidate because some of the candidates really focused on Iowa, [inaudible] New Hampshire. Trump himself, I mean, my sense is Trump has been a pretty... you emphasize candidate skills as really mattering in our conversation in November, which I think was good to remind people, this isn't just a matter of pick a lane and then you're the person in the lane and it sort of matters how well you do at explaining, making the case for yourself and against the others and just getting in the news and so forth. What do you think of Trump's candidate skills in 2023 so far?

WHIT AYRES:

Trump's candidate skills?

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah.

WHIT AYRES:

Trump is Trump. Trump is what he's always been. Trump is going to continue to be what he has always been. I don't think I would go out and trash the popular Republican governor of Iowa if I were running in an Iowa caucus, but Trump's gotten away with so much in the past. I think he feels like he can get away with doing anything he wants to do.

BILL KRISTOL:

And I guess I've been struck that he's a pretty effective demagogue in certain ways. He sort of knows to what to demagogue about and he takes his cues from the audiences pretty well and says things that people like me think are ridiculous or just false. But he's a little bit off the election denial, for example, for all that God knows, he was obsessed and still is, I think personally with the election denial stuff and talks about it more than some of his aides probably want. It doesn't come across that he's totally obsessed with it. I guess the way to put it, he talks about Biden's ruining the economy. Biden's going to get us into World War III. He's doing all these social things you don't like.

WHIT AYRES:

Yeah, yeah.

BILL KRISTOL:

I mean, I feel like Trump, he adjusts a little more than people who don't like him, which I certainly don't give him credit for sometimes. He's not bullheaded in a way about his demagoguery. He adjusts a little bit to try to see what people want to hear.

WHIT AYRES:

Sure. No, he's very good at sensing where his base is anyway and what they want to hear and feeding back to them what they want to hear. And he is a remarkable entertainer in many ways. People enjoy going to his rallies, not just to hear what he has to say, but for the fun of it, for being around people who are like-minded, for listening to him trash his opponents in memorable ways. They like it, they enjoy it. It's a lot of fun. It's entertainment as well as politics for him, and he's not lost any of that skill.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, that's what strikes me, I guess, that I think the entertainment part, you and I were talking the other day about David French's recent column about this, that there's a lot of hatred, frankly, and bigotry you might say, and anger in MAGA world. But there's a lot of, I don't know what to call it, pleasure in... They enjoy the crusade they're on in some ways, and they like their colorful standard bearer, you know [inaudible] some point.

WHIT AYRES:

That's a great David French column in the New York Times. For those of you who don't understand the MAGA crowd, it's really important to read David French's piece because he lives in Trump country and he's reflecting the views of many of his neighbors.

BILL KRISTOL:

On Iowa New Hampshire, if Trump — and the debates — if Trump tries to shun some of the conventional things you do, which is show up at the debates, invest quite a lot if you're the front-runner in Iowa and New Hampshire, but you don't want to lose both certainly and prefer not to lose either. Would it be a mistake for him? I mean, I've seen this argued both ways. Why should he go to a debate when he's 30 points ahead in late August and give everyone a chance to have a score a blow against him, either DeSantis or Christie or someone else, and that becomes a clip that lives on for two weeks. Isn't he better just making it a second tier debate? I mean, how much risk, if you were advising him, I guess, does he need to play by the usual rules or can he get away with a certain amount of avoiding the debates and even maybe deprecating one of the early states like Iowa?

WHIT AYRES:

He certainly is in a unique position that no other candidate has been in before as a former president who has continued his hold over the party. There is a risk though, if you just blow off a debate, in looking like you're taking the voters for granted. You're taking their views for granted, you're taking their support for granted. And he can take the support of some for granted, but I think it really hurt him in 2016 to blow off the Iowa debate. I think that's one of the reasons why Ted Cruz won and Donald Trump lost. So he's good in those debate forums and I think the downside is greater than the upside in blowing them off.

BILL KRISTOL:

And also in picky fights for the governor of Iowa and so forth. Because don't you think the only way he doesn't become the nominee I'm just absent of act of God or

something, is probably losing Iowa, it's a little hard to see him winning Iowa and then losing New Hampshire, I would say, and even if he did, he'd probably then win South Carolina and he's got two out of three. And losing Iowa, that seems like you'd want to invest a fair amount if you could to try not to do that. And I guess it seems like their campaign's a little uncertain about how to handle Iowa. They won last time without winning Iowa, so they might want to sort of downplay it, but I don't know. That creates a little more risk than they might otherwise have.

WHIT AYRES:

Yeah, I mean, it's a debatable proposition. It's the kind of thing that smart people have disagreements about, but I think generally taking the voters seriously is a good bet overall.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, so much of Trump's brand is that he's their champion and suddenly if he looks like he's taking them for granted, unless he can, I guess discredit the debates as rigged or hostile moderators and that sort of thing, I guess that's what he might... We don't really know how well that would work.

WHIT AYRES:

And he can schedule a rally opposing the debates that's exactly the same time, which is something he's capable of doing. Of course.

BILL KRISTOL:

Okay, so what about the rest of the field? So the rest of the field is really DeSantis, I would say, and everyone else, but we should go through everyone else too. But DeSantis... is it Joe Klein wrote a piece recently, maybe he's just finished, he's had his moment, it's passed him by, do you think that's right or he's still at 20% and everyone else is in single digits, right?

WHIT AYRES:

People always want to jump to premature conclusions to show how smart they are, and sometimes they are because they get lucky and other times they're not. Let's look at the big picture about anyone running against Donald Trump, Bill. First of all, it is really hard to go from a statewide race to a presidential race. My first presidential client, Lamar Alexander was famous for saying that going from a statewide race to a presidential contest is like going from eighth grade basketball to the NBA finals. It is really hard.

BILL KRISTOL:

And he was a good, incidentally, a good presidential candidate, but he did much better than expected. People forget that. And New Hampshire came pretty close to [inaudible].

WHIT AYRES:

Oh, yeah. No, he did very well. But he's exactly right about the difficulty of doing it. And there's a reason why a great many Republican nominees lost the first time they

were on the track before they came back and won the nomination. Whether it's George H. W. Bush or Bob Dole or John McCain or Mitt Romney. They all ran first and lost before they came back and won. And the reason is that they learned enough in the first time on the track so that they could do better the next time they ran. So it's really hard. And all of these people are first time candidates running for president. We don't have Ted Cruz or Marco Rubio. That's true of everyone except for Chris Christie who was in the 2016 race, not for long, came in six in New Hampshire and dropped out. But most of these people are first time candidates and that's hard.

The second point to make is that no one has quite figured out how to run against a Trump juggernaut. Donald Trump will stop at nothing to rip apart anyone he views as an opponent. He not only will attack their character and record, which has long been legitimate grounds for political debate, he attacks their appearance. Little Marco, Meatball Ron, he attacks their wife's appearance, asks Ted Cruz, he'll attack their wife's ethnicity. Ask Mitch McConnell, he'll attack a war hero's heroism, ask the family of John McCain. He will stop at absolutely nothing to rip apart an opponent. And he saves his worst and most vicious attacks for Republicans rather than Democrats. Ronald Reagan's famous 11th commandment, "Thou shalt not speak ill of a fellow Republican," is basically a joke for Donald Trump. So that's a reason why so many Republicans are reluctant to take him on, and the fact remains that no one has solved that problem.

So we should give a measure of grace to those who are running against him now, I think, if they haven't quite solved that problem because no one has. So that said, Ron DeSantis very bright guy, very good resume, very good record, very popular in Florida, turns a swing state into what looks like a hardcore Republican state in only four years. He has a lot of talent. He has some weaknesses which have shown up already. We talked a little bit about the fact that his living room to living room campaign style is not exactly his strong suit. He seems to have difficulty keeping good people around him who've been through a war with him. He had a blowout win in 2022, but literally no one associated with the 2018 close race where he barely won the governorship is associated with him anymore. He'll have nothing to do with the campaign manager, with the general consultant, Susie Wiles, who's now running Trump's campaign with the pollsters, which was North Star with either of the media firms.

None of them are involved with him. Most politicians who are successful over a long career have a team that they build up with. Lamar Alexander has many of the same people close to him today that were close to him in 1996. Joe Biden has the same people around him who've been with him for decades. Politics is a team sport, particularly at this level. And I'm not sure who has been around Ron DeSantis. He does have a pollster who's been there since 2022. Phil Cox, the well-respected former head of the Republican Governor's Association, went down there to run the campaign. He was gone in May. So having a team with you is pretty important, and we'll see if Ron DeSantis can get a team around him that he trusts other than his wife Casey. At this point, it doesn't look like.

BILL KRISTOL:

I mean, one thing, if I could just interrupt on this to maybe bring that point home even little more, I was thinking about this. People could say, "Well, the 2022 team won huge. So what does he need that 2018 team that you were a part of and your firm was a part of that took him to a one point victory?" On the other hand, in 2018, he won an

upset victory in the primary after starting off pretty far behind, and then won a very close election in a democratic year basically in 2018 and squeaked through. And it wasn't obvious he would win. In a way, you could argue that team and that experience is more relevant than coasting to a huge reelection blowout victory in 2022.

And in a funny way, if you got the people who helped you in 2022 in Florida, you could make the case that's not terribly relevant to taking on Donald Trump in a Republican primary winning a tough primary in '20, not like Trump, but still a tough primary against the statewide elected Republican in 2018. And then in a tough year, winning a general might be a better preparation. So I wonder how much that easy victory in 2022 is sort of a double-edged sword for DeSantis in a way.

WHIT AYRES:

Yeah. I'm not sure, but I mean, in 2018, everybody thought Adam Putnam was going to win the Republican nomination, be the governor. He'd been preparing all his life to do that. And there's another aspect of DeSantis that seems a little curious to me. He seems to be trying to run to Trump's right on some social issues, be it abortion or gay rights. There's not a lot of room to the right of Donald Trump overall, but he seems to be trying to run that way. And he did that with his Ukraine statement that the war in Ukraine is just a territorial dispute, which was one of the great unforced errors of this campaign so far because those donors we were talking about, they want Ukraine to win and they want us to support Ukraine.

And so by coming out with that kind of flippant statement, he really gave donors some pause that this was the guy they want to rally around. So DeSantis has some challenges. He's unquestionably a talented man with a very, very strong record in Florida. But he has done enough and said enough things to give donors enough pause to leave the door open for some other alternative to come up.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. Also, I think donors are not 100% enthusiastic about a six-week abortion ban, which DeSantis signed just a couple months ago and probably could have persuaded the state legislature to leave the current 15 week preceding, 15 week law alone I should have thought, but so Trump is pretty careful to be, moderate's not quite the right word, but not emphasize a very strong [inaudible]. I mean, he takes credit for the courts, for appointing the justices who overruled Roe, but he sort of leaves it vague about what he might do on the national level about abortion. Yeah, DeSantis is getting to Trump's right in areas where I'm not even sure Republican primary voters in pretty conservative states are quite where DeSantis thinks they are.

WHIT AYRES:

Yeah. I mean the smart play is to do what should have been done all along and that is leave this incredibly emotional and moral issue to the states. There is no national consensus that will be seen as legitimate in both Mississippi and Massachusetts. Our cultures are simply too different in the States. The best solution is to leave it to the state legislatures and let them decide what the law is going to be in those states.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, which is de facto Trump's position. Okay. DeSantis has left the door open where he might have closed it, I suppose, right? And altered history. It would've been DeSantis within 15 points of Trump, not 30 and basically everyone just deciding, okay, it's a two-person race. You think we're not there though. What about the others? I mean, Pence, Haley, Scott, Christie, possible people still getting in the race. Anything strike you one way or the other? Would you want to tell people to keep an eye out, especially for one or two of those or is it entirely just who does well at the debate or who hits upon something or what issue comes to the fore?

WHIT AYRES:

Well, I've got a baker's dozen of candidates here in the race. Let me just say something about a few of them. Chris Christie can really land a punch. I know. I was Marco Rubio's pollster in 2016 when Chris Christie leveled Marco in that New Hampshire debate. He knows how to land a punch. He's saying many of the same things that Asa Hutchinson is saying, that Asa's a good southern gentleman. Christie's a knife fighter and if he gets on the stage, I'll guarantee you he is going to land some blows on Donald Trump, whether Donald Trump is there or not. Chris Christie's challenge is that he's playing for that 10 to 12% of the party who are Never Trump voters. The Maybe Trump voters don't want to hear that Donald Trump is unfit for the presidency because that means they voted for somebody twice who's unfit for the presidency-

BILL KRISTOL:

Even if they're hearing it for someone who also voted for Trump twice Christie and actually supported him energetically twice. You still think Christie's too far from a political point of view along that path.

WHIT AYRES:

Bill, psychologically it's tough to say I voted twice for someone and supported someone who's unfit to be president of the United States. That's a psychological bridge too far for a great many of Maybe Trump voters, but Chris Christie really appeals to the Never Trump crowd and more importantly, he really appeals to the anti-Trump media, which means he is going to get a lot of play. A lot of play on network TV, on cable TV because he's saying what they think for the most part, but he's going to top out somewhere in the 10 to 12% range nationally. He may do better in New Hampshire. He could come in second in New Hampshire, I think, because he's got a base there and he's more popular there, but he's going to tap out nationally at the Never Trump percentage.

Nikki Haley has some real leadership chops. She showed it after the Dylann Roof massacre in Charleston, where she rallied the state to take down the Confederate flag, which has been going on a debate there for decades. David Beasley, the governor in the mid '90s tried to do it and had his hat handed to him, but she really showed some real leadership, I thought, after that massacre. She's a popular governor in South Carolina. She's got foreign policy experience in the United Nations and she's one of the very, very few people who came out of the Trump administration with a better reputation than when she went in, so she's somebody to keep an eye on.

Another one is Tim Scott. Tim Scott is a very interesting man. He's got an argument about race relations and opportunity in America that appeals to a great many

conservatives. He gives, as does Nikki Haley, a different face to the Republican party, rather than just a bunch of old white men. He is really popular among his colleagues in the Senate. Unlike say, Ron DeSantis among the gubernatorial core. Tim Scott is very popular, even the Democrats like him. They disagree with him, but they like him. There may be somebody out there who dislikes Tim Scott, I've never met them and if there's one of that crowd to keep an eye on, I would say it's Tim Scott. Mike Pence has a lot of respect among the more establishment Republicans. Mike Pence is 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 threads that needle. He may try and he will have a core group of support, but Donald Trump is a problem for him. We'll see if he can figure out a way out of that dilemma.

There may be some others. Doug Burgum is wealthy, he's an entrepreneur. Most presidential campaigns fold because they run out of money. He won't run out of money and there may be some others that might pop. There are one or two of them that have never run for anything before in their lives and I just marvel at the arrogance. It's like somebody wants to be a pilot and insists that the only plane they're going to fly is a 747. I'm like, come on, get on a Cessna 150 or a 152 and learn how to fly that before you try to fly a 747. Get elected to the state legislature, show you know what you're doing, but that's my bias, that experience actually matters in politics as well as in most other things like flying.

BILL KRISTOL:

Do you think it likely that someone else gets in, that Youngkin or Kemp or of the Republican governors, Sununu gets in? I guess that's possible if none of the others begins to take off. Do you think or does it just get too late in September or November?

WHIT AYRES:

No and you've mentioned the two that are most often mentioned. Glenn Youngkin won a purple state fairly handily in Virginia and has done a very good job as governor, a very popular governor. Brian Kemp, despite the fact that Donald Trump came after him, managed to get a thumping reelection and is very popular in Georgia, has a good base, understands the Republican party well. Either one of them could be significant factors, I think, if they decided to get in.

BILL KRISTOL:

When and how, it's hard to know, of course, but do you think things start to break? In terms of this field, either the DeSantis question, is he the alternative? And then the field below DeSantis, which one of them or maybe two of them conceivably pop? Is that a September thing? Is that a November end of the year thing? Is that a day after Iowa, everyone gets out except for the top three or four thing? What's your guess on that?

WHIT AYRES:

First of all, I'm not sure the national polls will move very much at all until voting starts. I don't see what's going to move them. It's hard to imagine the classified documents trial taking place much earlier than November, for example. Conceivably that could, but I doubt it. I think people are going to have to start voting. If people start voting

and Trump wins Iowa and Trump wins New Hampshire and Trump wins South Carolina, he's going to be the nominee. On the other hand, if he loses one or two or all three of those, then all bets are off. The pattern is that people who come up in the voting then follow along in the polls and so the polls tend to follow the voters rather than the other way around, at least the national polls.

BILL KRISTOL:

So I suppose the key there is then who is... Well, if anyone beats Trump in Iowa, that's obviously very, very big, but who's second, third, maybe even fourth because then presumably everyone else below that either gets out or has gotten out by the voters in terms of their own thinking. Now Christie seems to think he can skip Iowa and go to New Hampshire. I don't think that has that great a track record, but what do you think? Could someone win? Could one person be stronger? Could Scott be even, let's just say with Trump in Iowa, but then Christie becomes the alternative to Trump in New Hampshire? Does it not usually work that way?

WHIT AYRES:

John McCain blew George W. Bush away in the New Hampshire primary in 2000. No one expected that. So yeah, if you got a good base in New Hampshire, New Hampshire doesn't necessarily follow Iowa. I do think that Nikki Haley and Tim Scott need to make a pact between themselves, that whoever is weaker in Iowa and New Hampshire drops out and endorses the other one in South Carolina because if they're both on the ballot in South Carolina, they both are going to have a chunk of support. They will split up the non-Trump vote in South Carolina and make it easier for Donald Trump to win the state.

BILL KRISTOL:

I suppose DeSantis too. I mean that would be the question, is how long you can go with DeSantis at 20 and then even if they make a pact, they get to 20, but Trump's still at 50. You'd want to get it down to one on one presumably, as McCain was able to do against Bush as others have. Obama was able to do against Clinton, that wasn't inevitable. John Edwards did pretty well in Iowa, did very well in Iowa, but a little short and then a little short in New Hampshire, but they need to get it to close to one on one at some point early before Super Tuesday, I guess.

WHIT AYRES;

Right. That's why I'm not that worried about the number of candidates in the race. I mean, it's approaching the number we had in 2016. The key is not how many start. The key is how long candidates stay in when they have no realistic chance of winning. John Kasich stayed in the 2016 race long after he had any chance of winning. For example, in Virginia, Donald Trump got 35, Marco Rubio got 32 and John Kasich got seven. If he hadn't been in the race, Marco Rubio would've gotten most of that seven and he would've beaten Donald Trump in Virginia. Having candidates stay in long after they're no longer viable, plays right into Donald Trump's hands and that's one thing that we learned from the Democrats in 2020. Once South Carolina was won by Joe Biden, with Jim Clyburn's help, within hours, many of his rivals dropped out and endorsed him. So, it doesn't matter how many start, it matters how many stay in when they're no longer viable.

BILL KRISTOL:

My takeaway from this, it's very helpful because so much of the coverage is snapshot and national polls and what you're emphasizing is the sequential nature of a presidential race and the state level nature of it and that you get your Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada, I guess and South Carolina. We haven't mentioned Nevada, but that's important there also and then Super Tuesday, I guess, really is next, pretty much. What it means is, you could have not much change in national polls for months and then you could have sudden results. I guess you start to see changes though in the Iowa, New Hampshire polls in November, December. We saw that with McCain against Bush.

WHIT AYRES:

Right. But I pay a lot more attention to... Iowa polling is difficult because it's a caucus state, but still Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina, Nevada, those state level polls, if they are well done, will tell me a lot more than any national surveys.

BILL KRISTOL:

And then you get the consolidation of the other candidates, whether that happens or not and whether it's DeSantis or one of the others or I guess, conceivably DeSantis plus one, versus Trump for a while, conceivably.

WHIT AYRES:

Yeah. Keep in mind, voters don't think strategically. I was sitting in my dentist chair in 2016 shortly after the Virginia primary and I asked my hygienist if she voted and she said, "Oh yeah. My husband and I both got registered and voted. We'd never voted in Republican primary before because we didn't particularly like Donald Trump." I said, "Who'd you vote for?" She said, "Well, I voted for Marco Rubio and my husband really liked John Kasich." I looked at her and said, "So you canceled each other's votes out." She goes, "I never thought of it that way."

BILL KRISTOL:

I wouldn't be so bold when I was in the dentist chair talking to my hygienist, but that's impressive that you have such a good relationship that you're willing to risk her displeasure.

WHIT AYRES:

She's a very nice lady and we had very nice discussion, but it made me realize that voters are not strategic thinkers. They vote for who they think would be best regardless, and it has consequences well beyond the particular candidates they pick.

BILL KRISTOL:

The sequence, the consolidation, but not necessarily to expect that much, is what you're saying before Iowa and January 15th, except movement in Iowa itself and in New Hampshire.

WHIT AYRES:

Correct.

BILL KRISTOL:

And the polling... and I guess among donors some because depending on how things go on the debate stage and in other areas where people differ on issues, some consolidation even before then too. I mean, you did see movements in some of these cases, people like Gary Hart or Lamar... who it wasn't clear that he was going to be the one who would be third in 1996. There were a lot of other people who could have been in New Hampshire.

WHIT AYRES:

Some may drop out. I mean, Kamala Harris didn't even make it to Iowa in 2020. You could have a number of the folks drop out, particularly if they run out of money.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, that's interesting. It's a little more dynamic than people think, perhaps. A little more unpredictable, but still Trump's the front runner. The big picture to finish up on the Republican side is, when we talked in late November, Trump was at 50% and there were all these possibilities that he wouldn't still be at 50% after July 4th and he is still at 50%.

WHIT AYRES:

Yep.

BILL KRISTOL:

Okay. You're not going to cheer me up much on that. Gun to your head, the odds of Trump being the nominee are two to one, five to one, 10 to one. How-

WHIT AYRES:

Bill, without knowing what's going to happen with the various charges, with the court cases... There's so many in Donald Rumsfeld's inimitable phrase, "known unknowns," that I don't know how you can make any sort of informed and thoughtful judgment about that. Is Donald Trump the favorite? Well, of course he's the favorite. Is he a slam dunk to get the nomination? I'm not going there, at least not yet.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. Well, no, that's a very good answer and a good reproach in a way to the people who are trying to give odds to everything right now. I think what you're saying really though is it's more like he's a favorite. He's not a slam dunk favorite. The people who were just treating it as if it would just be unbelievable if someone else for the nominee, that is not correct in your jurisdiction.

WHIT AYRES:

No, that's not where I am, Bill.

BILL KRISTOL:

Well, what about the democratic side? I'm struck that everyone thinks it's unbelievable that anyone but Joe Biden could be the nominee. I'm slight dissident on

this, but I've got to say, I get huge pushback whenever I raise that possibility of it not being Biden. What's your sense of that, of the Democratic side?

WHIT AYRES:

If Joe Biden wants to be the nominee, Joe Biden will be the nominee. No one of any substance or seriousness is going to challenge an incumbent president who wants renomination. I can't see it. Now obviously if there's a health incident, something else highly unlikely or unpredictable happens, then that could change, but if he wants to be the nominee, he will be the nominee. Now that is not the will of most Democratic voters. 44% of Democrats in an Ipsos poll in May did not want him to be the nominee. 40% of Republican voters did not want Donald Trump to run for renomination. Overall, you have some two thirds of the country that do not want a Trump-Biden rematch. And I worry about the credibility of our political system if what we offer to the electorate in November of 2024 is a rematch of two men opposed by two thirds of the country. But we may very well get that. If Joe Biden wants to be the nominee, he will be the nominee.

BILL KRISTOL:

He seems to want very much want to be the nominee now. Do you think he could be, have thought it was wise to say he wants to be the nominee and say he wants to be the nominee and then in September or November say, I've decided not to be the nominee? That's a psychological question more I suppose than a political question or a polling question or anything like that.

WHIT AYRES:

Peggy Noonan had a very good piece last week in the Wall Street Journal where she said he could be George Washington. He could be the guy who voluntarily gives up the presidency when he didn't have to. He could say, I've done my job, I've restored normalcy, I've beat Donald Trump, I accomplished this and that and the other thing, I got us through COVID, and I've done my part and I'm going to ride off into the sunset. But frankly, first term presidents don't ride off into the sunset unless they're forced into the sunset. I think it's unlikely, unlikely that he will make that choice.

BILL KRISTOL:

And unlikely that we have a Gene McCarthy/Bobby Kennedy type situation where he's challenged so severely in the Democratic primary in that he decides he could lose it and steps down.

WHIT AYRES:

Yeah, but that's a helpful reminder going back to 1968, that both you and I are old enough to remember. It was, I believe, March 31 of the election year that Lyndon Johnson stepped aside. So, we're a long way from March of 2024.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, and the primaries were a little later then, so I looked that up because I was curious.

WHIT AYRES:

Correct.

BILL KRISTOL:

But they weren't that much. So that was right after New Hampshire two weeks after where he had done not as well as expected against McCarthy, maybe three weeks after in New Hampshire, and then Bobby Kennedy got in the race in the middle of March, and then Johnson steps down at the end of March. But again, New Hampshire's in February. People talk about, "Oh, that was a whole different world." Well, it wasn't that different of a world. Now, I don't know about getting on the ballot in later states and you had favorite sons back then and all, so it would be a little different, but it doesn't look like anyone's challenging Biden.

Now though, I've got to say, and this is just to totally anecdotal, and I was out there in 2022 urging Biden to take the George Washington option and be the successful one-term president as I would see it, and I think as Democrats would certainly see it, and even some non-Democrats, and hand it off to the next generation, risk of bit of a messy primary, of course, but that's less of a risk maybe than running as an 82-year-old. That was my view. I articulated a few times. I got the predictable calls from the White House saying, "That's not very helpful, Bill," but I am—

So then of course, after 2022 where Democrats outperformed, and you discussed this actually in late November that sort of put some of that to rest, and then Biden just said, "I'm running," and looks in pretty good shape. I think you'd say so. That was just decided, okay, there's no point litigating something's not going to happen. Which I certainly understand that, but I'm struck just anecdotally how many people I run into who don't want to vote for Trump, in some cases won't vote for Trump in '24, but in others are a little bit on the fence, between the parties, let's say, who really would prefer the competitive primary and the next-generation nominee, almost no matter who it would be, maybe they prefer it not be Harris, but think she wouldn't win the primary. It's easy for outsiders to be cavalier about, "Well, let's have a good primary and some good debates," and the insiders all say, "Oh my God, you don't want that. Let's just have President Biden again."

WHIT AYRES:

There are a lot, too.

BILL KRISTOL:

I'm struck how many people say that who are smart people, though, and who aren't just being cavalier.

WHIT AYRES:

Right, yeah.

BILL KRISTOL:

It does make me wonder how much of a market there is for a non-Biden nominee in '24 if that proposition ever could be tested.

WHIT AYRES:

Right, right. Well, I think that there is substantial enthusiasm for someone other than Biden being the nominee, but not to the point of challenging an incumbent president. I mean, there are a lot of good, interesting democratic governors. I mean there's Roy Cooper in North Carolina and Josh Shapiro in Pennsylvania and Whitmer in Michigan and Jared Polis in Colorado. I mean, there are some interesting folks out there. I don't think Kamala Harris would be particularly competitive, frankly, in a Democratic primary. Nobody I know on either side of the aisle thinks she's ready for prime time. But there's plenty of talent in the Democratic Party, but you're never going to see it emerge as long as Joe Biden keeps a wet blanket over all of them by hanging on to the presidency or trying to.

BILL KRISTOL:

And just as an analytical matter, I'm curious, this is very much obviously hard to predict, but if Biden decides, I'm just not doing it again, listening to Peggy Noonan and James Carville and maybe even watching conversations here and stuff and decides it's not the right thing to do, and they go through, let's just say a normally competitive but not insane primary and end up with one of these governors or someone else or maybe someone who ran in 2020 as the nominee Klobuchar, I guess, Buttigieg.

WHIT AYRES:

Klobuchar, yeah.

BILL KRISTOL:

Who would be stronger against Trump, the next-generation untested governor or senator, or Biden?

WHIT AYRES:

Oh, I think the next-generation governor, somebody who's not going to be 82 years old in 2024 would be much stronger, particularly if they're a good strong candidate who can run a good campaign and capture public attention. Then you have the whole generational question brought in to the game too. So, no, I think a younger governor with a very good record who's a very good candidate would pose much more of a threat to Donald Trump than Joe Biden.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, I think that too. I'd say the White House will push back very hard on that. Biden's the one guy who's beaten Trump, he's run before, he did it before. But I don't know.

WHIT AYRES:

Yeah, he wasn't 82 years old and 86 at the end of his term, either.

BILL KRISTOL:

I agree with that. I've got to say, I thought it would have more effect that Whitmer won by 10 points in Michigan, a swing state, obviously, that Biden won by 2 points in 2020, Shapiro won by 15 points against a pretty weak candidate, I would concede, in Pennsylvania. It was still 15. So, literally those two, and you could say the same about Cooper in North Carolina and some of the other.

WHIT AYRES:

Gavin Newsom, we haven't mentioned. California. Another one.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right, but in the case of, not so much Newsom, but in the case of the others, they literally won Trump voters. I've got to say, it's not just a hypothetical that, "Gee, I think they could be attractive to moderates," which, to win by 10 points in Michigan, you must have won some people who voted for Trump and held the entire Biden coalition, leaving aside who votes in 2020 and '22. But that doesn't really change the analysis. But I guess then the counterargument is, "Well, of course she's running for governor, not for president, and it's a different story running against Trump than running against a legislator," and all that.

WHIT AYRES:

Yes and yes. All of that is true.

BILL KRISTOL:

But I'm surprised how much the official Democratic world, I guess if you're an incumbent president, you have the White House, you have the White House, and I can say until I'm blue in the face that, "I don't know, I think the Wes Moore ticket would be better," and, "Look at all these votes you got in 2020, including down-ballot in Michigan." It moves a certain type of analyst, but it doesn't seem to move actual Democratic power brokers, at least at this point.

WHIT AYRES:

Yep. I agree with that.

BILL KRISTOL:

The White House is powerful, but maybe things could change. There are unknown unknowns as well as known unknowns. Any third-party stuff that you think is significant?

WHIT AYRES:

Well, this no-labels thing is all the talk about people who really don't want a Trump-Biden rematch, the 66% of the country that doesn't want a Trump-Biden rematch. But there's a real problem with this whole no-labels idea. There's some talk about a Manchin/Larry Hogan ticket for a moderate independent. The problem though, Bill, is that we have so many states that are locked into either the Democratic or Republican nominee, regardless of who they are.

California, Illinois and New York are going to vote for the Democratic nominee. They're not going to vote for a third-party candidate. Mississippi, Louisiana, South Carolina, Tennessee, North Dakota, South Dakota, Wyoming are going to vote for the Republican nominee regardless of who it's, so once you put these hardcore Dem states and hardcore Republican states into their categories, there are not enough electoral votes left to be competitive for a third-party nominee. Ross Perot got 19% of the vote in 1992. How many electoral votes did he get with his 19%? Zero. And that's exactly how many electoral votes a no-labels nominee will give or will get.

But Donald Trump is such an overwhelming presence in our politics, if he's on the ticket, if he's a Republican nominee, this election in 2024 will become a referendum on Donald Trump, not Joe Biden. And a referendum on Donald Trump where you have a third-party candidate splitting the non-Trump vote will help put Donald Trump in the White House. And there are a lot of smart Democrats who realize that, and they've been beating on the no-labels people, "You're going to elect Donald Trump. You're going to elect Donald Trump." We'll see if they listen, but it is a fruitless endeavor motivated by a positive motivation, I think, to offer an all alternative to Trump-Biden, but one that will end up doing the exact opposite of what they're trying to do.

BILL KRISTOL:

No, that's very well said. In an era of radical polarization, there's a market for a centrist candidate, for obvious reasons, because the parties seemed so polarized, but precisely because of the polarization, especially with Trump being one poll, it actually doesn't seem to be able to come to fruition. I kind of feel like ironically in 2028 with more normal, perhaps, candidates, I just put it that way in both parties, not Trump on the one hand and not an 82-year-old on the other, actually, there could be a market for sort of, "Hey, why don't we get a third choice as well." Because people would be a little less... But I do feel the dynamic this time will push everyone back to either camp, but as you say, then the 4% or 5% or 6% that stick with a no-labels type candidate. I think in 2020 the people who disapproved of both Biden and Trump went for Biden by about 30 points. Disapproval, you need to win the double disapprovers or double-haters, I think, and that's why the Biden Democrats are so alarmed by no-labels.

WHIT AYRES:

Exactly. Exactly.

BILL KRISTOL:

And even leaving no-labels aside, you said at the very beginning, just to maybe close with this, that the donors think Trump is a weak candidate and they also don't like certain things about him and they want an alternative. Are they right about that? That it is, is Trump the underdog? Let's just say nothing surprising happens, which would be itself a surprise, but sometimes nothing surprising does happen. And we end up with Trump-Biden and it's Labor Day, and they're kind of where they are, what—

WHIT AYRES:

It'll be a close race. It'll be a close race because of the polarization of the country. It would be a close race. Biden would be a slight favorite, in part because he won last time, but nothing is assured in that kind of race and I wouldn't bet the farm on either candidate, at this point.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, no, that's, I think, good counsel. I just say, anecdotally, again, I ran into no Trump voters who were switching to Biden and I ran into Biden voters. It's a very small cut, conceived of upper middle class, sort of Never Trump Republican-ish voters who voted for Biden last time, who aren't happy about having to do it again. They might do it at the end of the day against Trump, most would, I think, but is that most— 60% of them or 90% of them? Makes a big difference in Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin.

WHIT AYRES:

Sure does.

BILL KRISTOL:

If that 8% who went Republicans Against Trump types, if they hold it 8% or 9% or 10%, it's one thing, if they go to 7%, 6%, 5%, you suddenly start eroding your narrow margins in those states. I mean, a million other things could happen as well, obviously. But I think there's a little too much confidence among people who say, "Well, Trump's had three bad elections in a row, 2018, 2020, 2022. That, A, there was too much confidence that, maybe we'll close with this: I'm curious, you said voters aren't political pundits. They vote for who they want. People really thought after '22 that was going to convince Republican primary voters that you couldn't afford Trump again. And I remember, because they did underperform in '22 and lost in '20 and underperformed sort of in '18, and so they lost the House.

WHIT AYRES:

And '21 in Georgia, too. It cost us two Senate seats in Georgia in '21.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right. But the Republican primary voters don't seem to be terribly convinced that Trump is a weaker candidate. And to be fair to the Republican primary voters, there's not much evidence right now in the actual national polls that Trump is a weaker Republican candidate. They're pretty similar, right? Whoever.

WHIT AYRES:

Yeah, the... Historically, electability has been a weak argument in a primary. The way most voters think is, "I like candidate X, therefore candidate X has the best chance to win the general election." It may be different this time with some of the Maybe Trump voters because you have a nominee who was impeached twice, indicted twice, maybe more than that by the time we get to the primaries. He carries more baggage than a loaded 747. And I think that that may weigh on some of these Maybe Trump voters. They're Maybe Trump because they doubt that Trump can win, not because they don't like Trump. They doubt he can win; they think he carries too much baggage, and that's why they're looking around for an alternative. So that argument may carry more weight this time than it has in the past. But for the most part, the electability argument is not particularly persuasive to most primary voters.

BILL KRISTOL:

And he is the only Republican to win the presidency since 2004, so there's a little bit of... People who follow it very closely, "Look at 2018, look at Georgia in 2021." But if you're, I could put it this way, a normal Republican voter, but who's in a polarized mode and wants a Republican president no matter what almost in '24, I don't know, you think, "I don't know, Trump's the guy who defeated... overcame all the predictions in 2016. He kind of almost won again in 2020, despite the pandemic. Why am I supposed to vote for someone I like less well, just because some experts, not really backed up even that much by polling at this point, think that ultimately this person might be a little better against Biden? I'll take my chances on Trump." I don't talk to

that many Trump voters, but some of the ones I run into have that attitude. And I can't say that that's a foolish attitude on their part.

WHIT AYRES:

Yeah, I agree. I agree.

BILL KRISTOL:

Any final points that we have neglected? I'm sure stuff will happen in the next few months, the unknown unknowns and they'll maybe throw things up in the air. Or not. I come back again to that invisible primary. I just think the big story of these 6 months, Trump holding at 50 and Biden choosing to run for reelection, neither of which was entirely inevitable when we last spoke. And neither of those has been disrupted, I guess, is the way to put it.

WHIT AYRES:

Right, right. Bill, you and I have been doing this a long time. This feels, to me, like one of the least predictable presidential elections at this point that we've lived through. It looks so locked in, and it may end up being Trump-Biden and a close election in 2024, but it just feels to me like there's so many things we don't know that could happen between now and then that it feels like a very unpredictable political environment to me right now.

BILL KRISTOL:

No, that's really a good caution to end on. And yeah, in a way, maybe the first half of 2023 will end up having been the calm before the storm. It could happen, right?

WHIT AYRES:

Yep. Or maybe it'll be just like it is right now, 6 months from now, we just don't know.

BILL KRISTOL:

We will get together 6 months from now and have this conversation maybe just on the eve of Iowa, New Hampshire, where I think we'll know more, or maybe after Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada, South Carolina, where we really will know more. But, Whit, thank you so much for this very, I think, interesting and informative conversation.

WHIT AYRES:

My pleasure, Bill. Always enjoy it. Look forward to the next one.

BILL KRISTOL:

Me too. Thank you. Thank you, Whit Ayres, and thank you for joining us on *Conversations*.