

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

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BILL KRISTOL:

Hi, I am Bill Kristol. Welcome back to *Conversations*. I'm very pleased to be joined again by Doug Sosnik. This is our fourth conversation, actually, in a little over a year I think. But they all stand up well, I went back and looked at them. And I think they've been elucidating for me, and I trust for our viewers and listeners. So thank you, Doug, for joining me again.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Thank you, Bill, for having me. I think it's four conversations and three different campaigns.

BILL KRISTOL:

Isn't that ... Well, okay, let's talk about that. That's amazing. Yeah. So we spoke, and this was scheduled before Biden dropped out, we spoke the day after President Biden stepped aside on... So we spoke Monday, July 22nd, which is exactly, it's now what? Tuesday, August 27th, so five weeks ago. And yeah, talk about the three campaigns, but also talk about, you said, you stressed in that conversation, and I found that very useful and a lot of other people did too, how important the first four weeks or four weeks plus the convention were going to be in terms of Harris launching, defining herself, could the Trump people define her negatively? Where would we end up after five weeks? Which is now? So talk about the five weeks, talk about the three campaigns, talk about what Harris did right or wrong, what Trump did right or wrong.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Right. So, we did talk about five weeks ago, I thought there were three critical fights between Harris and Trump. One was obviously to be the first to define who Harris is. The second would be to define Trump. And then the third, which is as important, is to define what this campaign is about.

And I would say in the last five weeks, my assessment on those three areas is incomplete but I would say, overall, Harris is currently winning the fight to define what this campaign is about. She, I think, at least as of now, and I don't think anything has been resolved, but we have had five weeks where I think maybe with the exception in the last few days of a couple of cycles that Trump won or at least didn't lose, that essentially Harris won every new cycle in the last five weeks, so far she is winning the battle about the campaign being about change, and she is the change candidate and making the campaign about the future and not about the past.

I think she's also done an excellent job of defining who she is on her terms. Prior to the convention, I think there was a stellar rollout, and I think the convention was hitting on all the points that she was attempting to make before it. And so I think while not complete, she's off to a very good start, and the polling reflects the significant uptick in favorable views towards Harris, although it's not solidified.

And the third piece is defining Trump. And I think the convention, if it had been a convention, a Joe Biden convention, I think 90% of the convention would have been about a negative attack on Trump. And well, obviously, the Democrats had a convention in which a number of speakers went after Trump. The percentage of people a percentage of time going after Trump was really much less. First of all, he's fore-armed. And secondly, Trump every day going out on campaign does a better job of defining Trump than the Democrats ever could.

Now, having said all that and taking a step back, on the one hand the race is profoundly different now than it was five weeks ago. And on the other hand, it's really not nearly as

different as you might think. So, if you think about where the race stood from the end of October of last year until the run-up to the debate, the fact was Biden was within a couple of points of Trump, both nationally and the battleground states. Despite the fact that he had a job approval in the mid-30s, and we generally had around 70% of the country said the country was headed the wrong direction. So despite those historically low numbers, it was a very close race.

But now we've had in the five weeks since we've had a change of candidates, as I mentioned earlier, Harris has been on the attack, she's got the momentum. She's, as I said, has virtually won every news cycle. Trump is actually almost imploding in terms of his personal behavior. You can't imagine the things that he has done as a candidate. You can't imagine what he could have done to have been worse to advancing his candidacy. But having said all that, it's probably a one or two point race, which shows you how the... I call them tectonic plates. The divisions in our country, the structural divisions in our country, are so profound that what in the past where you and I grew up in politics, Bill, where candidates mattered and campaigns mattered, these are all on the margins because these tectonic plates are so strong that an event or a day doesn't impact them. So that, in a sense, that is much more similar than dissimilar despite how different the race has been.

The other thing though is the seven states that were competitive when we started the campaign are still the seven states that are going to determine the outcome. And the swing voters, which I'm sure we'll get to, are still the same swing voters when we started the campaign.

BILL KRISTOL:

You said one or two. I mean, I guess my sense is maybe if you want to be generous or a little bit to Harris, she's taken the race from minus-three probably when she took over to something more like plus-three. That's a decent size move given the, as you said, the extreme polarization. Maybe that's overstating it a tad. Maybe it's plus-four or five. But she's gained, I mean, she has reversed. She has a slight lead, right?

DOUG SOSNIK:

Yeah. Well, a couple of things. So first of all, what she has done is gotten back people that were a part of the Democratic base that elected Biden and Harris in 2020. She hasn't really eaten in yet to Trump's vote. And I suspect, by the way, that when the polls come out this week that she may well have a lead outside the margin of error nationally and in some of these battleground states.

But I think to me, we're really moving into the next phase of the campaign. And the next phase of the campaign is going to be the debate on the 10th of September. But I don't think right now I would overanalyze whatever polls come out this week, because I think it's going to probably a little bit exaggerate Harris's position off of the halo of the convention and having four straight nights of really having a really, really positive convention that, as I mentioned earlier, not only framed what this debate is about, but framed who Harris is. But I think that probably on the days running up to the debate, eight, 10 days from now, I think those polls will be probably more representative of where the race stands. And I think that it will still be within the margin of error. But I certainly would rather be in Harris's position then or now than I would have been in the day she announced.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. No, I think it is striking when you really step back and try to account for a little bit of just noise and variance and her getting a little extra bounce now, which might subside. I mean, basically it's the Biden 2020 numbers. He won by 4.5, he won six of those seven swing states by narrow margins. And right now, I mean, who knows? The swing states a little harder to tell, but whether she's down one or two where he was up one or two, but basically, it's looks for him .. It really makes your point about the tectonic plates. We've gone through a crazy three-and-a-half years: January 6th, the end of the pandemic, the President running for reelection when people didn't want him to, then pulling out at the last minute and his VP locking it all up within two days, and then having this five week spurt, Trump being Trump, destroying his Republican

primary opponents and looking very impressive, then looking not so great the last five weeks. You go through all of this, and we're basically at the Biden 2020 numbers. I mean, it really is kind of extraordinary.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Yes, but not quite.

BILL KRISTOL:

Okay, so tell me, yeah.

DOUG SOSNIK:

So, first of all, we had a realignment in American politics in the 2016 election and then accelerated with the Trump presidency. And as we've discussed in the past, this is a realignment that had been forming politically since the early-nineteen-nineties with the Perot vote. And this realignment is really built around the level of education of a voter. And so, we're now seven years, eight years into a political realignment that we really hadn't had since Reagan's victory in 1980.

But I think that while, certainly compared to Biden against Trump before Biden got out, Harris's numbers are certainly closer to 2020 than Biden's were by a long shot. But she's still running behind the Biden-Harris numbers in 2020, and measurably behind. So, she does have more ground she's going to need to gain to approach those numbers.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, that's important. Copy. That's what I was saying, unfortunately.

DOUG SOSNIK:

The electoral map is six points more favorable to Trump now than it was then.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right, people forget that too.

Let me ask a couple of just details about what's happened, and you alluded to a couple of things, then we'll get to the current situation, much more the going forward one and also some of the demographic breakdowns, and so forth. You mentioned quickly that Harris's favorable numbers have gone up pretty appreciably. You stressed the importance of defining Harris. I think of those three factors, all three were important. But Trump presumably wasn't going to get redefined in a big way one way or the other since it's all in on Trump, so she was the unknown factor. The degree to which she succeeded, and I would say you stressed five weeks ago, and I was totally with you, the degree to which it was a risk that the Trump people could drop \$100 million on her and define her as a California liberal, soft on crime, immigration, failed border czar. What happened there? They don't seem to have done very much, at least yet, so have succeeded very much in that definition. And conversely she, and Walz for that matter, have succeeded in their definition.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well, first of all, Harris has a tremendous advantage over Trump now in money. Now, he did have an advantage over her at the announcement. As it turned out, if they had dropped a \$100 million on her, it would've been wasted money. And the reason why it would've been wasted money is, inexplicably, having claimed that they've been working on a Plan B Harris candidacy since May, they inexplicably have still not settled on what her narrative is, what the argument is against her. And it's about eight different arguments they've made. This reminds me of John Kerry in 2004, made eight different arguments about Bush. So, if they had dropped a \$100 million on her when she announced it probably would have been wasted, because they didn't know what the argument was they were going to make against her, and they still haven't-

BILL KRISTOL:

No, that's fair. That's certainly fair enough. I guess what I was saying was just what you just said, what I was implying was what you just really said so well, which is: it is kind of astonishing that they didn't have in their head already here are the two or three things that they presumably could have tested that really might work best against her.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well, as unusual as this campaign has been, there's actually equivalency, even though it's on a different part of the calendar. And the equivalency is when Harris became the de facto nominee five weeks ago, it was the equivalency of the normal prior campaigns, the out party coming towards the conclusion of a primary campaign and moving towards the general campaign. And if you look at successful campaigns, in a sense, in this case Trump is incumbent, because he's the nominee, he's been the nominee since the beginning of the year, the outcome of the '96 campaign, the 2004 campaign, the 2012 campaign, all incumbents who won, was right in March, right after their opponent was wrapping up the nomination. All three of those successful campaigns dropped hundreds of millions of dollars and defined their opponent as they're just climbing out of the primary fight.

And so, in a sense, that happened in July. This year's March, wrapping up a nomination occurred in July, and that was the point at which Trump should have done what the previous three successful campaigns did, was to drop that money on them with a narrative that they had already decided on, and they would have would've been the first person out to define who she was.

BILL KRISTOL:

Do you think they could have, or do you think she had so much momentum and a friendly press and did a good enough job herself that she might have just sailed through it anyway? I mean, I guess it's hard to know, right?

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well, I think that they've done a really great job of controlling the narrative in a way that, I would call it, in... First of all, Democrats are generally not as good as Republicans at thinking visually. And Harris, they've done a great job as a campaign of driving their narrative in part just visually, not just with words. Also, she's been, as you mentioned earlier, she's been 100% in controlled environments and they're just sailing above everything. Now, they can't do that for the remainder of the campaign, although I don't think they have to listen to the press and other people and start doing five interviews a day. But because Trump and his campaign were caught so flat-footed, it was easy to not get drawn in to the rat-a-tat-tat back and forth, them landing some serious punches against her that she would have been forced to respond to. So I think it's been a huge failure on their part.

There always are these key defining moments that determine the outcome of an election. I think I've probably mentioned before, just like a sporting event. At the end of a game, you can look back at the one or two pivotal moments and say, "That was when the game was decided." And sometimes in real time you see it and you know it. So in the case of Joe Biden's presidency, putting his age aside, I think his presidency hit a tipping point in the summer of 2021, a confluence of events with saying COVID was over, how we got out of Afghanistan, inflation rising, and supply chain problems. Those things all happened within 90 days, and his presidency never recovered from that. If Trump loses this election, and we're a long way from this election being over, but if Trump were to lose the election, I think the most decisive moment in the campaign was how they handled or didn't handle Harris' announcement that she was running.

BILL KRISTOL:

Interesting. And you mentioned also that Harris so far has you think won the fight about what the race is about. It's about change, it's about moving forward, and she's the candidate of

change. How sustainable is that if you're the incumbent vice president? How much can Trump claw back that part of the fight over what the race is about and say, "It is about change and it's about changing from this 70% wrong track, Biden-Harris environment?"

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well, you have personal experience in knowing the limitations of the role of the Office of Vice President. And I don't think there's anyone in America who thinks the Vice President of the United States is calling the shots on anything. Now, obviously—

BILL KRISTOL:

So that helps her really, you think?

DOUG SOSNIK:

Yes.

BILL KRISTOL:

It's harder to put Biden around her neck, yeah.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Right. Now, if she were a governor running, she would have an easier shot at not being associated or tacked to Biden. So, she is Vice President, but I don't think most people think that she was running the country and making these decisions, and I think that's reflected in the polling.

BILL KRISTOL:

So you think the Trump people have a tough time saying, "Biden-Harris, Biden-Harris, Biden-Harris, Biden-Harris border, Biden-Harris Afghanistan," all that stuff? You think she has a pretty clear shot at being herself, so to speak?

DOUG SOSNIK:

Yeah, and I think Biden-Harris, Biden-Harris, I mean, that's not a narrative, that's not an argument. But what he's trying to do, and he started it last Friday, I think it would have been nice, I know Harris had a spectacular five weeks that couldn't have had a better convention. And by the way, one of the things about the convention was no one talked about it because there was no issue. But if they had lost control of the streets and the hall on Gaza, that would have been the complete narrative storyline of the convention. So, the fact they managed that so adroitly, I think is part of why it was such a successful convention. It would've been—

BILL KRISTOL:

It's a very important dog that didn't bark, right?

DOUG SOSNIK:

Right.

BILL KRISTOL:

I've thought a lot about that, and people took it for granted after the first two or three days, but it wasn't. A week, 10 days, the weekend before, people were very worried about that.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Right. And there was pressure all the way up until Thursday night where they were trying to get a speaker and they were able to handle that. But anyway, on Friday, I think it would have been good if they could have gotten Harris out for a very easy, light event and basked in the glow of

successful four days. I'm sure that they were exhausted, and I can understand why they didn't do it, but it'd have been nice if they had done that. Trump did go out that day, and what Trump is desperately trying to do is get into a back and forth with Harris, because the last five weeks she's been hitting a tennis ball against the wall and he's trying to get an engagement and get her to take the bait. And I think that they've been really smart at how they've handled this.

BILL KRISTOL:

They, Harris?

DOUG SOSNIK:

Yes, in the campaign.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. I thought though, and maybe this is very micro tactics also, who the heck knows? But I guess this is maybe me being influenced by '92 and the incredibly successful Clinton-Gore bus trip ride out, which I think was right out of the convention, wasn't it?

DOUG SOSNIK:

Yeah.

BILL KRISTOL:

Literally the next day, yeah. I mean, I thought you prolong the convention, and you prolong the bounce, as it were, with, as you say, an easy event Friday with some adulation, maybe even a two-day thing at a bus tour, whatever, go from Chicago into the Midwest. It's not that far to Pennsylvania or Michigan, or whatever. But I mean, they were exhausted, there were a million reasons not to step on their own story in a certain way. But I do feel like for the first time, and maybe this was just inevitable after such a successful week, a successful five weeks, we're speaking Tuesday, so the last what, four to three, four days? I feel like it's stalled out some. I mean, it's inevitable, as they say, probably. But that there's not quite that same sense of Harris on the move and Trump flailing. I don't know.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well, what I'm getting ready to say is what I think, it's not what I know. So, there's been a lot of conversation about how big an advantage it's been for Harris to have a short campaign. And there are a lot of advantages. I think the biggest advantage is the fact that you're not forced in a primary you know, the [inaudible] to the left to get the nomination. But there are disadvantages to a short campaign. And one of the advantages of a primary in a campaign is it makes you a better candidate. And people say what a great candidate Bill Clinton and Barack Obama was. Well, Bill Clinton, when he announced for president in '91, was not a very good candidate. And it took him bouncing around for eight or nine months until, I think it was October or November of 91 where he gave a series of speeches at Georgetown where he kind of got his voice before the primary started. And Obama when he announced, he was not a good candidate at all, he was terrible, but the process made him better. And I think he got his voice in the Jefferson-Jackson Day dinner in Iowa in the fall of '07.

But that was after being out there for 12, 15 months and getting bounced around and trying things. So Harris didn't have the benefit of all that. And she's also building a plane while she's flying it and trying to figure out the staffing. And so I think that they probably wisely thought that they'd been pulling it off. But this is, even though it's a short campaign, it's closer to a marathon than a sprint, and they just can't keep running at the sprint level for the last five weeks. They got to pull back, they got to get centered. She committed to an interview. One of the things, so the two things about running for president, one is having the two tests. One is, can you articulate a vision for the future that's compelling and that is relatable to people so that you can get them to vote for you?

That's the first test, and that's usually through the primary. The second test though, is do you have the temperament to withstand the pressures of a campaign? Because if you can't have the temperament, you don't have the temperament to withstand the pressures of a campaign, how are you going to have the temperament to withstand the pressures of the office? So the second phase is the actual campaigning part, and at that phase with 12, 15 hour days and nonstop, you can't think, you're just campaigning and trying to get through the hazing. And so it's that first part where you really can articulate your vision for the future, you have to do that in the early stages because you can't be, in the second temperament hazing phase, you can't be figuring this stuff out. Harris doesn't have that luxury. She's having to do both at the same time.

So I think that while they would've probably liked to have just kept the sprint, they know it's too long without getting re-centered and taking a step back. Because the last thing I'll say is my general rule of politics is politicians make mistakes when one or two things happen. One is they either drop their guard or the other is when they're tired. And I think it's the obligation of the people who run these campaigns to put their candidate in the best light possible. And for the last five weeks, I don't think the Harris people could have done a better job of figuring out how to show the best of Harris, but they also have that second obligation of not putting her in a position where she's tired and makes mistakes.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, that's interesting. I want to come back in a second to going forward then, how she defines the agenda and the interview question and the debate question and sort of the next stage and stages, but just one more backward looking thing in a sense, which is Walz and Vance. When we last spoke, Vance had been picked and had a rocky launch, Walz had an excellent one. I've got to say I wasn't convinced he was the right pick, but so far he's been excellent, he's been very, I think helped some. Do you feel A, how much do they matter though? VPs don't matter usually, but maybe they matter a little on the margin in each case, and B, do they matter going forward or have they sort of done their jobs respectively and now it's just Harris-Trump?

DOUG SOSNIK:

I think traditionally the VPs don't matter, but I think the one prediction I'm comfortable making is I think that Vance will have more of an impact on the outcome of this election than Walz.

And the reason I say that is anytime in politics a negative works is when it reinforces an existing negative perception. And remember, they picked Vance when Trump was running against Biden. They just had the bad luck of rolling out a campaign, running mate convention for the previous election, not the one we're in right now. And so I think what is so damaging about Walz, I'm sorry about Vance. What's so damaging about Vance to me, beyond the fact he's a terrible candidate, he has no charisma, he barely got elected to the Senate in a red state. What his biggest problem is, his negatives reinforce Trump's negatives.

So you can transfer a negative argument against Vance to Trump, and that's potent. And that's why I think it was such a bad selection. And you have to say, one of the things that's appealing about Trump is you ask him a question, he gives you an answer, pretty honest answer. So they asked him like, "Well, you're accused of not paying your taxes. What do he say about that?" He says, "Well, only a moron pays taxes." So they asked him after Vance got announced, basically whether he regretted it or not, you spent five days defending your VP. And his answer was, "VP's don't matter."

So anyway, I think that Walz has been great. I would not have picked him. I think she's comfortable with him, they look great. I'm a big believer in the way you see how campaigns going is you watch it on TV with the sound off. You just look at the visuals, looked at the visuals of the debate, you knew within three minutes how that debate was going. You look at the visuals, you see Trump against Vance in the convention, Vance was shrinking before your eyes. You could see that Trump had no use for him. And you looked at the interaction between Harris and Walz, just the visual interaction, and you could see that those are two people who were very comfortable with each other.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, Walz making Harris a better campaigner and candidate, which I think he pretty clearly did actually, that's itself more of a contribution than most VP candidates make. He doesn't bring a state, he doesn't bring a constituency, particularly. But just making her better, that's extremely important, right?

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well, and I alluded to it earlier, I'll just say it again. When you're running a campaign or running a White House, if you're a staff person, the single most important thing for you to do, it's to figure out how to make your boss look good, figure out what settings make them look good, figure out what time of day they shine. So everything is about making every event a home game for them. And it's, people don't think about that, but that is the single most important thing. And Walz clearly is part of an element of making Harris look better.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, interesting. Let's do calendar and then maybe we'll get to the kind of demography and constituencies and then obviously the Electoral College is [inaudible]. But okay, so they call you in, the Harris campaign, it's five weeks done, down, 10 weeks to go. How do we think about this next 10 weeks? It's not an undifferentiated stretch, obviously. And then in particular, I'm very curious what you think about if they've overdone the caution on the interview and made it too much of a big deal. And then what about the debate? I guess it's going to happen. But anyway, how do we think about the final two thirds of this campaign?

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well, so just in general, you look at ways you can lose the campaign and you look at ways you win the campaign. So you want to focus as much as possible on the areas where you can win the campaign, but you have to acknowledge and figure out how to neutralize where you can lose the campaign. So for instance, Harris is not going to run for a second Biden term. That's not how she's going to run. It's not like Bush in '88 who ran for a Reagan third term.

By the same token, you don't want to make it an issue like Gore did in 2000 where you're with Clinton, against Clinton, and why aren't you with him? And every day it's a story about... So I think they were effective and you want to do as much, you want to do what you need to do so no one can accuse you of walking away from the Biden administration or from Joe Biden personally, but you want to do as little as possible to associate yourself with Biden. You're trying to win an election.

And so in the case of Harris who's a great performer, she looks totally comfortable in her own skin, you want as few non-controlled events as possible, which includes interviews or press conferences. So you want to do as few as you can, but enough that it's not an issue. You want to find a reporter who is perceived to be tough enough that they're not thinking you're taking a powder, but really isn't that tough.

And so what I would want to do then is try to not have made a big deal about it, not raise the stakes on it, but do enough of them so I can say we've done them and ignore it. So that's not where we are right now. So now where we are is she's going to do one interview. She's going to identify, I think whoever that, I'm not going to name names with you on the air here, but I know exactly who I'd be thinking about. You want to find someone who passes the laugh test that they're a real reporter, but they're not crazy and not going to really kill you. And so I think you got to get this thing over with. And then I would, going forward, I mean basically other than the interview, at this point, nothing's really going to matter except the debate. So I would want to schedule her in a way that she appears to be out there every day, but I'm going to do really light... So put the interview aside. I want to do as light events as possible, light wear and tear on her, light travel on her so we can get her rested and be able to get her comfortable for the debate. Half of getting ready for the debate is just psychologically getting ready and getting comfortable. The other half is knowing the stuff and being able to articulate it. So I believe that the race is largely going to be outside of that interview. I think absent of something happening

in the world, I think the race is largely going to be frozen until the debate and the coverage will be around the polling that'll come out. They'll overdo it this week. And because I think it's going to not be a reflection of where the race really stands, I think it'll be a little bit too pro-Harris, but I would basically stick to our plan, not stick to the presses or anybody else's plan and try to get ready for that debate.

And then after that debate, we'll see where you are. But at that point, if the debate goes well enough and the polling is good enough, then you might triple down on a very controlled campaign without a lot of engagement. This is not, lastly I'll say, what was unusual about Biden and Trump was it was the first campaign in my lifetime that was about the past and not the future. It was both candidates re-litigating the past.

Now, what Harris has been successful up until now, as I've mentioned a couple of times, she's reframing this as a debate about the future versus the past, and she's the future and Trump's the past. And ironically, by the way, all the money that Trump invested in making age an issue is now coming back to haunt him. There's just absolutely no way of any of your listeners, anyone who's above a certain age, you are a different person now than you were eight years ago. And Donald Trump is a different candidate, a different person now, and it shows every day. So I think Harris has done a very good job of framing this about the future and about, as I said earlier, and that she's about change. I think that if you're in the Harris campaign, you want to keep that going all the way through.

BILL KRISTOL:

But the debate's a very big moment, bigger than in most campaigns, right?

DOUG SOSNIK:

It is because of how unsettled this race is. And most of the time in the past, I think it was not the case in 2016, and I do think Trump ended up coming back and winning at the end. But in the past, most campaigns had been decided by Labor Day. That wasn't the case in '16, I think it was the case in '20, although actually Trump, I think closed the gap at the end, but still lost. But this is a campaign that will be decided after Labor Day.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, it's really worth stressing how unusual that is. I mean, debates don't matter much usually because maybe the front-runner slips a bit, Romney and Obama and '12 and gives up a point, gets it back in the next debate, and it's sort of a wash at the end of the day. And voters have, as you say, pretty much made up their minds. Harris just being such a new candidate and relatively undefined, not having gone through a whole bunch of primaries. I mean, here's one tidbit for people like us who like political odd facts, I guess, I believe Harris-Walz is the first ticket in the modern times, since the modern primary system, neither of the candidates has ever won a vote in a presidential primary, which is really crazy in a certain way, right?

DOUG SOSNIK:

That is interesting.

BILL KRISTOL:

I mean, normally the nominee, of course, by definition has won some votes. Normally the VP candidate has run for president either the year before, the cycle before, like with Gore, or the same cycle with others, and has won some votes. And so voters, they sort of have a little bit of a... Record's not the right word, but there's a certain sense of, okay, they got some votes, the presidential candidate won, the VP candidate didn't win, but fell short. But in that cycle, or the one before, like Gore or Bush in '80, you know. But this is pretty unusual. I think the degree to which they really aren't defined is still a little understated, don't you think? I mean, the media, we know who they are, and political junkies know who they are and we're interested in Harris's speech and she sounded more centrist. But I kind of do think that debate will be a really big moment for that reason.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well, I'm going to respond to your question, but I do want to mention that you inadvertently just read one of the Trump talking points if he loses the election, which was how it was rigged and how neither one of these have ever won a single vote in the primary. So in the past, way too many number of years to want to admit, so one of the things I would always say in speeches in the summer before an election was there are three things that the press is going to focus in the general election and none of them matter. One is who the VP is selected. Two is how the conventions go, and three is the debates. And I said, history showed none of these three matter, and all three of those could matter in this election.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, that's so interesting. Such a terrific, that's really a good way of putting it, really a striking contrast. I want to get to the sort of more demographic side of it, but just on the image and issues, if you were talking to the Harris people today, they called you in, what would you worry about or argue for in terms of her image? Does she look strong enough? Is there a leader still, a kind of presidential Commander-in-Chief question, just lurking there? Maybe for reasons having to do with the gender and maybe for reasons just having to do with the fact that she's been vice president and a pretty, as you say, vice presidents don't make decisions, so no one's ever seen her make decisions at that level, in a sense. And on the issues, I mean everyone assumes immigration, crime, are the tough issues for her, but the economy, but maybe that's, is that right? And which are the better ones for her? Just what would your basic top two or three things on image and issues be?

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well, I didn't finish answering the question earlier. The other element about this campaign up until now had been just about the past, not the future. The other element of this campaign was, and I think still is, it's the most issue-less campaign I've seen on both sides. This is not a battle of the white papers. And if it had been a battle in 2016 on the white papers, Hillary Clinton would've won. So going forward, there's something that is, I think, one of the most single, most significant things that Harris has done differently in a sense, breaking from the Biden campaign, that's really not been picked up upon. And it's one of the two parts, elements of what I would be doing about the future. The single biggest difference, I think, between how Harris is talking about where we are and Biden is on the economy: Biden was not meeting people with where they are.

Biden was talking about how great the economy is, how much better we're doing in our country compared to anywhere else in the world, how inflation is down. And he was talking about a country that Americans don't know. They can't relate to that. And if you are trying to persuade people and you give them a reality that's not real to them, they kind of tune you out. Harris has had a much different approach to talking about the economy. She acknowledges the struggling, she acknowledges the price of inflation and cost to people and their families.

So I think that has been a huge difference. And I think that is one of the two elements that I would continue to do going forward. And the second, though, is to talk about the future. And she frames, which I think is quite effective, she frames talking about the future in the context of the family. The family is that organizing principle, whether it's infant and care for them and childhood tax credits and education, all the way through to the family to providing for senior citizens. And so I think the two elements, again, it's not white papers, it's going to where people are in terms of their lives, talking about the future, and I think wrapping it in the context of the families is very smart. And then of course, you can back into the negative, that's what I'm for, and Donald Trump is for himself and tearing us apart.

BILL KRISTOL:

I think the family thing is certainly, I think they were very skillful on that, I thought, at the convention, but particularly with her speech. But in the way you said, but also on the biography, she introduced herself through her mom, really, in a very unusual way. I thought it

was very deft and as if someone who's written a few speeches, not quite at that level, with that amount of pressure, not the way you normally do the bio thing, which is normally pretty mechanical and it can look like you're just praising yourself or puffing your resume or it's boring, actually. I mean, the whole narrative of the mother, it made it, I think, accessible to other people, they had the commonalities of other people, the American immigrant experience. I just thought that was a very... Those first eight to 10 minutes of her speech were very well done.

DOUG SOSNIK:

I agree with that. By the way, all part of a controlled narrative, I think she had the shortest convention acceptance speech in history.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah.

DOUG SOSNIK:

It was less than 40 minutes, so less is more. It's what Trump doesn't understand when they give him a speech and he reads 45 minutes of it from a teleprompter, and the crowd is dead and he's on message, and then he just gets off the teleprompter and starts riffing and exciting the crowd, and it's all the stuff that's going to get covered, and it's all counter to the narrative the campaign's trying to drive.

But I would say, going back to what I said earlier, I do believe that you really can tell, looking on television, watching on TV, which is a visual medium, tells you everything with the sound off. And so, if you take the two conventions, first of all, we take the two conventions and watch each of them for 20 minutes, you would never know that those conventions were in the same country. But secondly, and back to your point, what the Democratic Convention was embracing, what is today's world. And so, the first point you made about embracing her biography, embracing her immigrant mother and all of that, is very much a 21st century American story, it is not a 20th century American story.

Another 21st century American story was Doug Emhoff's blended family, and as opposed to working around it and being awkward about it, they embraced it, which is very much... With 50% of marriages in America ending up in divorces, both I think how she handled her biography, and Emhoff and the family, I think was embracing the reality of 21st century America.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, interesting and effective, I thought. Well, let's talk about the demographics, and you mentioned education earlier, that's been something you've stressed and studied very closely. How much do things change, because it's Harris and not Biden, in terms of, you've mentioned that there's been a rallying to her of traditional Democrats, I take it minorities, but also younger voters. I think you've written in your memo last week that the gender gap is bigger perhaps than it's ever been, which way does that cut? Does she risk losing older, white, non-college voters, does she make it up with younger? Just what's the basic demographic situation, in your view?

DOUG SOSNIK:

Yeah, I think it's the same that it would've been, if you like, when you and I were talking two campaigns ago or whatever, it's probably the same groups, but more so. One group that hasn't changed at all are independent voters, and in the last four election cycles, whoever the independent voters voted for, they won the election. The last election we had where the candidate who carried the independent voters lost was Romney in 2012. So independent voters, who are increasingly a larger percentage of the voters, because these are people who feel alienation towards both political parties, and there's a higher percentage of independent voters out west, I think 40% of voters, for instance, in Arizona are independent voters, increasing numbers in Nevada. So the first are independent voters.

The second I think are disaffected Republicans, who don't like Trump, who... You might be able to relate to this, Bill. The lifelong Republicans who feel like the party has left them, or that it's no longer their party, but are really not comfortable voting for Democrats. And I think a big part of the convention, particularly the second, third, and fourth nights for the Democrats, was trying to create a permission structure for the Republicans to vote for Biden and feel okay about it. Things like Republicans saying, "I don't agree with a lot of his issues."

BILL KRISTOL:

For Harris, I think you said.

DOUG SOSNIK:

For Harris, I'm sorry, for Harris.

BILL KRISTOL:

That's okay.

DOUG SOSNIK:

So they're looking for permission—

BILL KRISTOL:

I make that mistake about once every 10 times.

DOUG SOSNIK:

So I think you're trying to create a permission structure for Republicans to feel okay voting for Harris, even though they're fundamentally not comfortable voting for a Democrat.

And I do think the gender gap is a big issue, but it's even a bigger issue now because of a Harris-Trump campaign. So the gender gap first surfaced in American politics in the 1980 presidential race when Ronald Reagan won, and Democrats have always since then outperformed with women and Republicans have outperformed with men. So I think a combination this year of the historic nature of the Harris candidacy and the masculine, testosterone-filled Trump candidacy, look no further than Thursday night of his acceptance speech, where he was introduced by the head of the fighters, and then he had a wrestler before that, Kid Rock before that, it was very masculine convention, and then picking Vance I think reinforces that. So I think the gender gap will be historic in this election. And by the way, the biggest driver underneath the gender gap to explain it are Black women, about 25% of the gender gap is just with those groups.

So I think you'll see, because of Harris's candidacy, the two issues here, one is the turnout, which I think will be historic, and then the other is, when people vote, how do they vote? And so, I think that the men, I think, are going to be another important group. Trump has done extremely well with non-college white men, but he's also done really well, since '16, with non-college Hispanic men, particularly younger. Those were the biggest drop-offs when Biden was starting to fade.

So Harris has done a good job of picking back up a lot of that support. There's still though, I mentioned earlier, she's still running behind with Hispanics what Biden did in 2020. And then, college men, who Biden did very well with in 2020, still lost them but narrowly, college white men, college white men in 2022 really went for Republicans in the midterms, and I think a lot of it were economic-driven reasons. And so, I think that college white men are going to be important for Harris to try to get back closer to the 2020 numbers.

But then, there's the non-college white men, who polling, at least up now, if you look at the surge of support for Harris compared to Biden, it's really largely across the board, but it's not with non-college white men, she's basically running flat. And while the 2020 election was the first election in history where non-college white voters were less than 40% of the vote, first time in history, in 2024, in the three Rust Belt states in the Midwest—Michigan, Wisconsin,

Pennsylvania—non-college white men will constitute over 50% of the vote, and that was Trump's strategy in 2016 was to get that vote out. And so, I do think one of the reasons to discount the polling a little bit is when Trump is on the ballot, and that was the case obviously in '16 and '20, the polling underestimates who's going to vote, and those are hidden Trump voters. It's less of an effect when he's not on the ballot. So that's one. The second though is, in the privacy of a voting booth, I think there are people who are not comfortable voting for Harris, who might not say that out loud, but they'll do it in the voting booth. So I think these are some sleeper, some factors, which makes me as a Democrat nervous about the election, even though we're doing a lot better now than I ever would've imagined six weeks ago.

BILL KRISTOL:

Would you want to see, or hope to see, some actual movement on the margin, obviously just less bad loss among non-college whites, and especially non-college white men, or would you just think that's probably baked in, and the key is just a massive turnout of younger voters, minority voters, and so forth?

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well, Biden won narrowly in '20, and Clinton lost narrowly in '16, and Biden largely incrementally improved with most sets of voters, non-college whites, but it wasn't an overwhelming amount with any of these groups, it was just incrementally enough to pull them over the top. What I had been saying in a Biden-Trump campaign was, what I've always been saying, is Donald Trump has done more to encourage civic engagement in America than any single politician. We had record turnout in 2018, we had historic turnout in 2020, we had near historic turnout in 2022, but I thought 2024 we're going to have a record... Not a record low turnout, but a much lower turnout than what we've seen since Donald Trump rode down that escalator in 2015. That's no longer the case.

So the two issues really are turnout, and who you're going to be able to turn out, and then the other is these persuadable voters. And so, these seven battleground states, they're the same ones that are the closest since we realigned in politics after 2016, they're overwhelmingly in the middle on education levels, not favoring one side or the other. So the secret to do well in these states, and they've all been extremely close in both of the last two elections, is a combination of getting your vote to turn out, and at the same time, persuading the swing voters.

BILL KRISTOL:

Do you think, on the one hand, Harris has some advantage for simply getting the natural Democratic vote to turn out over Biden, I should think, a younger candidate, first female president, first Black woman as president, and some disadvantage maybe on the persuadable independent Republican-ish types who were a little more reassured by Biden, or maybe not, I really think that's the question.

DOUG SOSNIK:

So there are seven states that are considered the most competitive, four in the Sun Belt, North Carolina, Georgia, Arizona, and Nevada, and then in the Midwest, there's Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and Michigan. There are some really positive scenarios with Harris running compared to Biden, and then there can be a less positive scenario.

So one scenario is she's clearly much more competitive in the Sun Belt states. Those were all lost for Biden by the time the debate was happening, certainly after the debate, because of the fall off... And these are states disproportionately younger voters and non-white voters, and those are the groups that left Biden compared to how they voted in 2020. She's largely gotten most of those back. She's still got work to do with Hispanics. So she's clearly improving her position in those states. The question is though, in those states, is she able now to make them much more competitive but fall short?

And then, you go to the Midwestern states, where there's some evidence that she is running behind where Biden was with these non-college whites in particular, who, as I mentioned a

minute ago, are a larger share of the vote, where she could end up in the worst of both worlds, where she does well enough in the Sun Belt to make it really close but not win, and then in the Rust Belt states, the margins work against her because of the difference between the voters. Now, she could, of course, run the table and be able to run all four Sun Belts and the Midwestern states, but that is a concern that I have in the Midwest, because they really are different demographically than in Sun Belt.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. That's so interesting. I was going to ask you, but that was great that you got right to the... Where are you on the debate of, at the end of the day, at the end of the end of the day, it's always been the Midwest states that have determined really, and the blue wall held until it didn't hold, and then it held again in '20, or was rebuilt in '20, and those remain more important. Could you really do a Sun Belt strategy and lose one or two of those states?

DOUG SOSNIK:

Yeah.

BILL KRISTOL:

You could literally in the sense that the votes would add up, but is it really plausible? I don't know. Do you have to make a choice, or do you just look at the end of the day at seven states, you're going to spend a fortune in all of them, and your message isn't that different, I guess, for each of them. So how much of this is are we overthinking when we start to really differentiate among these states, and how much is it really a choice at some point of are you going to go try to win Georgia and North Carolina, which are big states, and which, Georgia, Biden won by very narrowly, and North Carolina lost quite narrowly, people don't appreciate how narrow that was, actually, in 2020. How much is it a real choice, how much is it overthinking a little bit, and you've just got to play the best cards you have in all seven of them?

DOUG SOSNIK:

Just quickly on North Carolina, that is a state that Trump carried in both '16 and '20 narrowly. The Republicans have nominated a Republican candidate for governor there that is way crazier than Trump, he's way more MAGA than Trump, and so you could have a bottom-up effect at the top of the ticket in North Carolina, which I think is potentially the least competitive of all the states in general. And most people, by the Spring had put North Carolina as a leaning Republican state and not as a toss-up, now it's back being a toss-up. On the money thing, I think the Harris campaign, assuming they're not going to compete in Florida, which will take a couple of hundred million, they'd be crazy to compete in Florida, so assuming they don't compete in Florida, they could probably compete everywhere, they have enough money now. So most campaigns have to make choices, I'm not sure they're going to have to make choices. They raised \$540 million in five weeks.

The way I look at the map is, I just factored in a little bit how I was thinking about the VP, the two states that if they tip the other way, I think that really will determine the election, is Pennsylvania and Georgia. If Trump were able to win Pennsylvania, there are still paths for Harris to win the election, but it's much more difficult for her. And by the same token, if Harris were able to win Georgia, then Trump, again, can win without Georgia, but it's going to be really difficult.

So if you think through between now and election day, in a sense, you call it in tennis a breaking serve, or in the NBA, who I've done a lot of work with, in playoffs, they'll say playoffs don't really start until the road team wins the game on the road. So if Harris holds Pennsylvania and Trump holds Georgia, then you're really getting into a narrowing of the map. I think ultimately, it's the three Midwestern states that are going to be the most decisive. As I mentioned before, there's a six-point swing in electoral college now since the last election, and so, whereas that would've been enough for Harris to have won in 2020, because of that swing,

taking votes out of Pennsylvania and Michigan, she now has to also win Nebraska too, which I think is basically a toss-up.

Without getting too much in the weeds for your listeners, if she wins those three Midwestern states, and then loses Nebraska Two, and Trump wins the rest of the Sun Belt, then it's the 269-to-269 outcome, which means it then goes to the House of Representatives, and the way they determine the vote there is whichever party has a majority of the members, they pick the winner, and the Republicans will end up with at least 26 congressional delegations where they're the majority. So Harris could win those three Midwestern states and still lose the election.

BILL KRISTOL:

She needs Nebraska Two, which casts its vote, if they don't change it, which it doesn't look like they're going to, there was talking about them doing it, by two for the state, and then one for each congressional district. Nebraska Two which is what Omaha suburbs is, I guess.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Yeah. And Biden—

BILL KRISTOL:

Biden won it pretty well, right? It wasn't—

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well, he won it by six in 2020, but Trump won it in 2016, and they've reapportioned it a little bit more favor to Republicans.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right. I do feel like the script writers, if we can use that term, of course, having gone through everything we've gone through in the last four years, beginning with January... Well, beginning with the 2020 election, January 6th, and everything else with Harris, how could it not be a 269-269 outcome? If this were Netflix, we could bet a lot of money on that being the result, and I hate to even joke about it, because I feel like, oh my God, it's going to happen, and then God knows what the country looks like.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well, those are the Republican script writers, by the way.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, fair enough. Or Democratic script writers who wanted to write a tragedy, not a comedy.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Yes, exactly. One thing I wanted to go back to the map on—

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah.

DOUG SOSNIK:

...and I wanted to mention another issue that indirectly relates to the gender gap, so there were a series of New York Times polls that came out, I think, right before the convention in the Midwest, and Harris was ahead of Trump in all three Midwestern states by four points. But what's I think most significant about those polls was the fact that Trump had 46% of the vote. Trump, not for a single day as president, had 50% of the country or more giving him a positive job approval. He never, in 2016 when he won, or in 2020 when he lost, he never hit 47% of the

vote. So a majority of people in America have never supported Donald Trump, and continue to not support him. And having essentially the implosion of third-party candidates now, for him to win, the only way he's going to get above his 46, 47, which is where he lives when things are going well for him, is to disqualify Harris. Two things. One is to drive his turnout, remember now, occasional voters in American politics now lean Republican, not Democrat. Unlike for the last 50 years, the occasional voters used to be all Democratic, now they're Republican.

So for Trump to win, he has to get that vote out, and he did that in 2016 raising the turnout of people who don't normally vote. But the other is he has to disqualify Harris. And that's what he did in 2016. The 2016 election ultimately came down to really not an election about Donald Trump. He was able to make it an election about Hillary Clinton. 18% of the people on election day had negative views of both candidates and 70% of those voters voted for Trump. And a big chunk in the battleground states, 275,000 people voted for third, fourth, and fifth party candidates in Michigan. And Hillary lost, I think by 10,000. They would overwhelmingly have supported Hillary if they weren't in the race. So, a big issue for Trump going forward is how to disqualify Harris.

And the last thing I want to say that's related to that, if you ask the Biden people about the 2008 campaign and their debate prep to prepare to go against Sarah Palin, they'll tell you the overwhelming amount of time was spent as how does an old white guy attack a woman in a way that's effective and doesn't turn people off? That was their biggest concern in the 2008 debate. How do you manage that? And Trump in general with women, and particularly with Black women, is poison. And is really, I think, going to contribute to this gender gap. We need to take a college-educated, white Republican woman. I mean, how in the world can she watch that, how Trump talks to Harris and mocks her and be comfortable voting for him? So I think it's going to be very important in the debate to see how he tries to figure out how to disqualify Harris.

BILL KRISTOL:

That's very interesting. And we come back to the debate, maybe that's a good place to end, but it does seem like that's just going to be so much more important than in a typical race. And plus, if it goes one way or another, I guess there might be a second debate, there will be other things that will happen, but certainly that would be a reset. Or if it's not a reset, that's itself a story, I guess, assuming it is on September 10th, the debate, that would be the big news on September 11th. I mean, there's so much more we could talk about. I've just got one foot down on North Carolina because I've got a slight weird personal interest in it. Way back in March, I said on some, I don't know, podcast or something that—with Elaine Kamarck, I remember—that I thought actually, at the time it was Biden, obviously, that Biden's chances were better in North Carolina than Georgia.

That I just think that Lieutenant Governor running is a big problem for Trump because there's some evidence that when you get that kind of candidate, and this was Michigan and Pennsylvania in 2022 in the governor's race, really, swing voters shy away. And I think there will be an upward sense of identity. I mean, Trump can't go to North Carolina and campaign without having him there. I think he's already been on the stage with him. And I do wonder, whereas in Georgia, it's the opposite. Brian Kemp, who Trump idiotically attacked, but now he's making up with, is a popular mainstream Republican governor. He is supporting Trump despite being attacked by Trump and mocked by Trump and all this. And I got to think you're Atlanta suburban, Republican-ish types, that gives them some comfort voting for Trump. So I really do wonder whether North Carolina could replace Georgia almost. But that gets, you're now getting to extremely fine margins, obviously in those two states and everywhere as well.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well, so there's a... I grew up in North Carolina, by the way, so I have a—

BILL KRISTOL:

I didn't realize that. Okay, well, there you go.

DOUG SOSNIK:

So it's an interesting thing about politics. When candidates, people run for president, there are some states that they're just bad fits and you can't, maybe it's cultural, but they run way below how they should. So in the case of Clintons, both Bill Clinton and Hillary Clinton as an example, they both did really badly in North Carolina compared to how they should have done. The state just didn't like them. And in the case of Trump, the two states that really just don't like him, the first is Utah, but he's still going to win. But the other is Georgia. They just find him to be a bad fit.

Now, so in the early part of the first decade, there was a sort of conventional wisdom, particularly by Democrats, they called, "Demography was destiny," and that Democrats are going to be the majority party because all young people, all non-white people, they're all the ascendant population and they're all going to vote Democratic. Well, it didn't really quite turn out that way, but Virginia has voted for Democrat now in the last four presidential elections. And everyone said North Carolina will be probably about 2008 when Obama carried it in 2008, which is the first time a Democrat had carried the state since Jimmy Carter. But no Democrat has carried it since. So everyone's assumed that North Carolina was following, and it hasn't. And it probably will eventually, but the reason it's different, and the reason I think it's harder for Harris than Georgia is unlike Virginia in which all the growth in the state is in Northern Virginia, and all the metrics about education levels and all the kinds of things that are driving American vote, same in Georgia around Atlanta and the Atlanta suburbs. That's how Biden won. North Carolina is different.

North Carolina has much higher, has five cities, but they're not mega-cities like that. But more importantly, there's much more of the sort of ex-urban, extreme suburban lifestyle of how people live. So people in North Carolina live differently geographically than in these other states. And the data is clear. The more dense population of a community, the more you're Democratic. The more rural the community, the more you vote Republican. And then you work the middle. So that inner city suburbs, suburbs that are closest to cities are the second most Democratic. And then when you move to areas that are a little less densely populated, a little further out, they become less Democratic and start becoming more Republican.

And then when you go from areas that are even further out and less densely populated, they become more Republican. And then when you get to, as I said earlier, the least densely populated, they're all Republican. So North Carolina has a disproportionate number of people who live in these exurbs, in areas that are less densely populated, less educated, and tend to vote for Republicans. And that's been the problem for Democrats to unlock what they had expected to happen 15 years ago in turning North Carolina into a blue state. They hadn't voted for a Democrat for Senator since 2008.

BILL KRISTOL:

No, it's really true. And they put the convention there in 2012, so Obama thought he could do it again, and they were bullish on it. They do have a democratic governor, but it's very, very interesting. I very much agree with you on the fit question. But then of course in this case, it also turns out underneath the fit question, how well they fit is the kind of demographic reality. And certainly, my personal experience, I didn't go up North Carolina, but I've been there a fair amount, taught their Davidson College for a term. I was there a couple of days a week in 2019. I mean, the Charlotte suburbs did not feel like the Atlanta suburbs, let me put it that way. They just feel five points more Republican and are trending as quickly away from that, I guess is the way to say it.

DOUG SOSNIK:

And I don't want to get into too much history here, but North Carolina had always been considered the most progressive southern state.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right. Terry Sanford and all that, yeah.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Right. And he started the Research Triangle Park. And while North Carolina was clearly racially divided, it was grading on the curve more tolerant than the other southern states, but hardly defensible. So there was an expectation of North Carolina, for instance, having the first Black governor, which of course never happened. It was Virginia. But in a sense, the heart and soul of North Carolina, at least in modern times until now, was the 1984 Senate race between Jim Hunt and Jesse Helms. And Jesse Helms won that narrowly.

And since then, no one has said North Carolina is the most progressive state. Now, these things change. And when George H. W. Bush started off in politics in Texas, it was a dark blue state and he was the head of the Republicans and no one was Republican. And that's transitioned, obviously. It's a bright red state, now it's moving back more towards the Democrats. Democrats actually could take the legislature this November, one branch in Texas, but it's still a fundamentally Republican state. Tennessee, probably not in my lifetime, in your lifetime, but Tennessee will be a Democratic state based on a huge influx of people coming from the outside. And there's been a huge influx of people from the north that moved to North Carolina and they bring their politics with them. But there's a lot of resistance culturally and demographically and geographically that's keeping North Carolina from hitting that tipping point.

BILL KRISTOL:

That's interesting. And also things happen which are a little more, what's the right word I'm looking for... less demographically driven perhaps, and more just depending on candidates winning particular elections. And then they become path-dependent, if I can use that term, within the parties. So you and I would not have predicted, I don't think, that Tennessee and Texas would have the kind of Republican parties they now have. They had the opposite kind of Republican parties most of our political lifetimes. Centrist, responsible, internationalist, producing Senate leaders, Bill Frist or Lamar Alexander or whatever. And Texas obviously Bush, both Bushes. Compassionate conservatism was a Texas thing, right? And now you've got very right wing parties in states. It's a little bit of a gerrymandering thing I think at the state legislative level, a little bit of just certain people winning primaries and whatever, and Trump weighing in in some places, and some accidents. I don't know if Abbott had decided to be more like Bush, could he have been? Or even Rick Perry. He probably could have been, he just didn't want to be. So I don't know. These things are more, they're less deterministic than people say.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well, I think there's actually an easy explanation for it, and say what you want about politicians. But they do understand where their self-interest is. And there are, I think, easily explainable reasons for what you just said. And no, Abbott could not do that, and no, Abbott could not be head of the Republican Party. And that is because the tribal politics that's taken over our country. People are self-selecting where they live now based on living with people who share their values. There are real estate companies, I think it's called Move Red. There's a real estate company in Texas that is reaching out to people in blue states and trying to get them to move to Texas and live with people who are culturally, you share your values with. So there's a book, this guy wrote a book in the early 2000's about how people are self-selecting where they live based on people's shared value. So as a result of that, you have 40 states now that are completely controlled by one political party. And when I say that, control their governorship, the state house, the state legislature. So if you want to get reelected—

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, and both senators, I think in almost every case.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Yeah, they're only, now with Manchin leaving, there are only four senators as of now of a different party than the presidential candidate who carried their state in '22. There's only 20—

BILL KRISTOL:

And only four states with split representation, five I guess with Manchin. So 20, 45 of the 50 states have unified senate represent, so to speak. And almost every one of those has this governor of the same party and same legislatures.

DOUG SOSNIK:

And there are only 22 members of the house in a different party than the president who carried their district in 2020. 94% of the house are non-competitive seats. So for survival in a red state, you got to go to the right because you'll lose a primary, not the general. And if you're in a blue state, you got to go to the left because you can lose your primary, but you're not at any risk of losing the general. Now, this will change, this is for a longer podcast for another time. This will change as our patterns of life change and a variety of other things. But this is going to be a very slow change. I mean, I think Tennessee could be a purple state in 10 years maybe, and maybe a blue state in 20 years. I'm guessing, making that up. But in the wide sweep of history, 10 years is nothing. But when you have five more election cycles before it's purple, that's something.

BILL KRISTOL:

Well, we'll have to do a conversation about the bigger, bigger change that you've always said is coming and it's just unclear when. And maybe, incidentally, if Trump loses, things get shaken up a little faster than the 10 or 20 years.

DOUG SOSNIK:

I don't think so, and I know, it's not we're going to cover this today. The reason we're going to change is largely when the baby boomers are pushed aside in the next generation, which will probably, it's the largest population group, millennials and Gen Z. They're the largest population group in America now, but they only constitute 47% of voters. By the end of the decade, the majority of the voters will be these generations and they will be leading our country. But if you look at young Democrats and young Republicans, first of all, they dislike both parties. They distrust authority. They overwhelmingly support politicians to support climate change. They overwhelmingly support officials who support gun control and a variety of other issues. So people say, "Well, these are at 70%. How come we are not passing laws like this?" Because we have this artificial structure in our politics, but that's going to melt away with this generational change.

You look at these Republican— like Barbara Comstock, who was a right wing House investigator for 20 years, as right wing as they came. And she became a member, a republican member of Congress in Northern Virginia, which became every year increasingly Democratic. So what did Barbara Comstock do? All of a sudden, she became a moderate Republican and then she became a Never-Trumper. Now, I don't know her and I don't know what her orientation is, but I do know that what she did was what she had to do to try to keep her job as a member of Congress. So these are going to be action-forcing events that are going to change the issues and positions that people take. But I think we're 10 years away from that.

BILL KRISTOL:

Could well be. Probably right. So that's another conversation we really should have. Anything on the actual next 10, getting back to the next 10 weeks as opposed to the next 10 years. Anything we haven't covered that you would watch for, you would ask people to keep an eye out for? Inflection points, numbers, just kind of moments?

DOUG SOSNIK:

Well, we danced around it or alluded to it several times. And as I mentioned to you earlier, the primary process is twofold. The first part is the sort of narrative, why you're running, figuring out how to communicate it, right language and words. And the second is the hazing. Can you handle the hazing? And Harris hasn't had the hazing. And that's again, there are advantages and disadvantages to a short campaign. But that's going to be something to watch, which is how

does she handle the hazing? I think she'll be very good at it. She's been it in the past, but there's nothing quite like running for president. There's no way you prepare for that. So how she handles the hazing is going to be something really important to watch. And again, as I mentioned earlier about the importance of if you're working for these candidates, is to put them in an environment that's best for them.

So I think you want to be able to demonstrate that she can handle the hazing, she's up to the job, but I don't want to do that any more than you need to. And so the debate is going to be the split screen. How do you handle the back and forth? And again, as I mentioned earlier, it'd be very interesting to see how Trump handles debating a Black woman. But in the case of Harris, then, it's in that debate, how is she going to handle the back and forth? And then on the day-to-day of the campaigns and it's... Look, I worked for Bill Clinton, who's one of the greatest politicians of our lifetime, in history, I think. But he made mistakes. They all make mistakes. She's going to make mistakes. So it's how she handles it and pops back up that's going to really be important. And she doesn't have the benefit of having gone through an extended period of time through a primary.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, that's such an interesting and paradoxical moment. A huge benefit of not having had a primary, and the challenge of not having had a primary at the same time in that of the short campaign. Doug, thank you very much for this very interesting and thought-provoking conversation. I really appreciate your taking the time to do it again, and so thanks.

DOUG SOSNIK:

Thank you. Nice to be with you, Bill.

BILL KRISTOL:

And thank you all for joining us on *Conversations*.