

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

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BILL KRISTOL:

Hi, I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome back to *Conversations*. I'm very pleased to be joined again today by my old friend, Ron Brownstein, Senior Editor at *The Atlantic*, Senior Political Analyst for CNN. We've done a few of these conversa— And just to summarize, one of the best political analysts. I won't say the best, we have too many other friends. One of the very best political analysts in America today, electoral analyst. And we're, what are we, two weeks exactly before the election? You're going to explain everything to us, right?

RON BROWNSTEIN:

Yeah, as best you can explain a race that is close enough that you're probably not going to know going into election day, who's going to win. By the way, we've done a few of these conversations, but our conversations about presidential politics began before the 1988 race with Michael Dukakis and George H.W. Bush. So, we've both been watching this for a while, and one of the things that makes this so, well, fraught is obviously the stakes in the election, in terms of the divergence and the pathways forward for the country.

But also, this kind of, the number of swing states has shrunk so much since those earlier days. The campaigns are fighting out in really half as many or possibly a third as many states as they used to, but what's left is really closely balanced on the knife's edge and is just nerve wracking for them all the way across each. I saw yesterday in the events that Vice President Harris did with Liz Cheney, which we're very good and we'll talk about, at one point, she said, "Yeah," she kind of acknowledged, "Yeah, I do wake up in the middle of the night pretty much every night," and I'm guessing she is not alone in having that sentiment two weeks out.

BILL KRISTOL:

There's so much to talk about. It's so close. And so, what's the landscape that creates that it being so close? It both looks so much like 2016 and 2020. So much unlike the elections when we first met in 1988 and '92 and '96 and so forth. And it's both so something totally new, an ex-president running for the third time, something that hasn't happened in way in over a century. And then, the first Black woman candidate for president. So, it's both an amazing mixture of total novelty and no novelty at all, it seems to me.

RON BROWNSTEIN:

Yeah.

BILL KRISTOL:

So, you're such a good analyst of the electorate, and you became sort of so well known for explaining how the electorate breaks down. So, give us the basic. What is the breakdown, the basic breakdown of the electorate in 2024? How does it compare to the last couple of presidentials and how does it compare with the way it was before?

RON BROWNSTEIN:

Yeah. To the point of when we started doing this, I started in the '84 campaign, you might've been even a little before that. And at that point, white voters without a college degree were the dominant block in the American electorate, as they had been all through American history. I mean, from Jefferson's yeoman farmer to FDR and Walter Reuther's guy on the line, as late as

'84, white voters without a college degree were two-thirds of all voters according to the census data. And I'm just looking here, college educated white voters were about one in six, so 16%, which meant that people of color were about 16%. So, it was basically two-thirds whites without a college degree, and the remaining thirds split about evenly between college whites and people of color, who at that point were mostly Black voters, right?

Now, since then, we've had a very steady process of demographic transformation of the electorate. Whites without a college degree have declined about two to three points every four years as a share of both eligible and actual voters. And the difference has been made up by steady growth among the other two groups. There's some perfect—almost too perfect—historical symbolism in that 2008, the election that first elected Barack Obama, made him the first African-American President in American history, that was the first election in which non-college whites, the blue collar whites fell below a majority of the voters. And they have continued to fall since, even as Trump has generated enormous turnout among them, right?

Turnout has also risen in response among the other groups that are much more resistant to Trump. And so, the composition of the electorate has been affected really by the composition of the population. I mean, the two factors that, we basically have two factors that decide what the actual electorate on election day looks like. One is turnout among the various groups, and two, is the presence, the relative presence of those groups in the population overall. So, that general pattern, which has taken us from the eighties to now is still holding between '20 and '24.

I'm publishing new data, literally today, from the great Bill Frey, a demographer who probably has focused more on the changing structure of the electorate than I think anybody out there. As Donald Trump said, "We've never seen anything like this." But Bill has put out his new projections of what the eligible electorate will look like in 2024, and what it shows is that those non-college whites are again declining another two points, with college whites and people of color each rising by about a point. So, what does that mean? Non-college whites, I said they were two-thirds of the voters when Reagan won his landslide in 1984, they'll probably be under 40% of all the voters this time.

I mean, that is a big change over our lifetime. By the way, one way to measure that change, Donald Trump in 2016 and 2020 won about the same share of those blue collar whites as Reagan did back in '84, roughly two-thirds of them. But that showing among the blue collar whites was sufficient to get Reagan to 59% of the vote. It got Trump about 47% of the vote both times, which shows you the power of demographic change. And then, the college whites are growing and the people of color are growing. I wouldn't be surprised if we see an electorate that is somewhere around 38 to 40% of the voters, depending on which data source you use, will be the whites without a degree, and the people of color will be just under 30, and the college educated whites will be just over 30.

And very importantly, before I filibuster you too long, Bill Frey's analysis also looked at the state by state of the swing states, and the decline in the share of eligible voters for non-college whites is even greater than the national average in Michigan and Wisconsin, where they are largely being replaced by college whites. It is less than the national average in Pennsylvania where they're mostly being replaced by non-whites. And that could be, normally, these changes that we're describing are kind of glacial. They affect the electorate over decades in the way that we were talking about from Reagan to Trump. But this year, everything is so closely balanced. Who knows if a slight shift in Michigan and Wisconsin from non-college whites mostly voting Republican, to college whites that are now mostly voting Democratic, that could be enough to tilt a state. I kind of feel like we're in a butterfly effect election where even the smallest flutter could transform the environment.

BILL KRISTOL:

So, give us the rough breakdown as far as we gather them, and some of the data, of course, conflicts a tiny bit ... But of these, each of these big categories, both I'd say college whites, non-college whites, people of color, and then men and women, I would say, I mean, based on what's the relevant vote share of Trump, Biden or Republican?

RON BROWNSTEIN:

Right. And by the way, I should mention that real quick. Frey's analysis is that women, in every election I believe since 1980, women have turned out at a higher rate than men. There are also more women in the eligible voter pool than men, right? So, women, he projects will be about 52% of all eligible voters in 2024, which would make it pretty likely that they're going to be about 53% of all actual voters, right? Because, again, it's the share in the population times the turnout, and women are a bigger share of the population and they turn out at higher rates. And by the way, that turnout gap between women and men is larger for younger people than older people. Men over 65 actually vote at a higher rate than women over 65. But among younger people, the turnout rate, the turnout gap is even more tilted toward women. And the other thing that is relevant to that, just the last one we should probably talk about, is that Gen Z were about 1 in 10 eligible voters in 2020. This time, they're going to be 1 in 6.

So, even if their turnout ... Gen Z is basically '97 to 2014, so these are big elections. 2024 and 2028 are big elections when a lot of them come in, age into the electorate. But 18 million people have turned 18 since 2020, Bill Frey calculates. And with those, they're not going to be 16% of the actual voters because they don't turn out as much as older people. But there will be five, six, maybe 8 million more Gen Z voters this time than last time just because their sheer numbers of eligibles is growing so fast. So, where are we?

BILL KRISTOL:

Well, give us the breakdown of the, yeah, the categories by education, by gender, and by age, more or less.

RON BROWNSTEIN:

I mean, I don't think we have a great consensus in polling, but by and large, you see Trump about where he was among white voters without a college degree four years ago. And that, in some ways, is a victory for Kamala Harris.

BILL KRISTOL:

Which is where?

RON BROWNSTEIN:

Which is probably, he's somewhere around 63 to 65, and she's somewhere around 33 to 36 among—

BILL KRISTOL:

But just because, so in 2020, which I guess you do know better than what's going to happen in two weeks.

RON BROWNSTEIN:

Right.

BILL KRISTOL:

Trump was close to two-thirds of whites without a college degree.

RON BROWNSTEIN:

Yeah. But they're a little bit below two-thirds. Biden did a little better, right? I mean, the various data sources we have don't entirely agree. But generally speaking, Hillary Clinton only won about 30% of these non-college whites, and Biden got that up, depending on your source, somewhere around a third, 33? Maybe 34. I'm trying to remember what the AP VoteCast number was.

BILL KRISTOL:

And college whites?

RON BROWNSTEIN:

Now, the college whites, again, they improved from Hillary to Biden. Hillary, still, I'm trying to recall, Hillary, I think still narrowly lost them. Biden narrowly won them. In the exit polls, he won them by bigger margins in other data sources like Catalyst and the Pew validated voter's study. This time, I think Harris is on track to do better among college whites. She almost certainly will do even better than Biden did among college educated white women, right?

BILL KRISTOL:

And how big is the gender gap? I mean, it's been going on a long time, and some people make it sound like it's even bigger than ever, but I've seen some other data that shows...

RON BROWNSTEIN:

No, right now, it doesn't look bigger than ever in most polls. I mean, the exception of John Kerry in 2004, Democrats in this century have won women voters by somewhere between 11 to 13 points pretty consistently. Biden pushed that up a little higher, maybe to 15 points. Harris might push it up a little more than that. And it is possible that Trump will run a little better with men than he did last time, because you are seeing improvements certainly among Latino men. He is going to run better with Latino men than he did last time, maybe a little bit better with Black men, and probably somewhat better among young white men, younger white men, that he's put a lot of effort into courting. I would not be surprised if Harris wins women by more than Biden did and loses men by more than Biden did.

Celinda Lake, the Democratic pollster, has a rule of thumb that says, "Democrats win when they win women by more than Republicans win men." In point of fact, if you look at the data from Bill Frey, they don't actually have to do that. In every swing state, women will be a majority of the electorate. So, what does that mean? That means if Harris wins women by as much as Trump wins men, she can win the states. That is easier said than done in the Southeast states where a lot of white women are also evangelical Christians and don't vote for Democrats in the same way that they do in the North. It may be more doable in the Southwest than it will be in North Carolina and Georgia for her.

But certainly, if you're looking at the former blue wall states, I always put that former in there for reasons we could talk about in a minute, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, those are states where, in 2022, the first election after Dobbs, the Democratic gubernatorial candidates all ran better among college educated and non-college educated white women than Biden had done two years earlier, right? And that would seem to me a real opportunity for her, especially among the college white women.

The visits she did Monday with Liz Cheney to Chester County in Pennsylvania, Oakland County and Michigan, where she was and I was at the rally just two days earlier, and Waukesha, Wisconsin, that was a guided missile, a precision guided missile aimed at the places and the people that I think represent her best chance to improve over Biden in 2020, and offset what could be some losses elsewhere, particularly in the inner cities and the smaller rural places.

BILL KRISTOL:

But the improvements, what's so striking is, I mean, they're at the margin because the polarization is so deep that in fact, you see, I think I saw just the latest, one of the polls recently, but this is true across many polls, that basically Trump is holding 92, 94, 95% of his voters in 2020. Harris, though a very different person than Biden in certain ways, is holding 92, 94, 95 of the Biden voters. Even 2016, there was 90 plus percent. I mean, the number of voters who are in one camp or another, that's really a new phenomenon, right? I mean, when you and I, the first campaign you came to was '84, where there was a 20 point win by Reagan?

RON BROWNSTEIN:

I mean, we went from, I mean, I was just trying about this the other day. In 1928, Herbert Hoover won 59% of the vote, and then four years later, FDR won 59% of the vote. I mean, we don't do that anymore. I mean, we are in total trench warfare, John Sides and Lynn Vavreck and their collaborators, the political scientists in their books have kind of, I think, popularized the phrase, "the calcification of American politics," where you're talking about trench warfare, very small shifts from election to election. Now, in this campaign, we might see some shifts that just kind of add up to an offsetting, leaving us very close to where we have been. I mean, I do think—

BILL KRISTOL:

But am I right that the shift— just if I could drop—

RON BROWNSTEIN:

... Yeah.

BILL KRISTOL:

The shifts tend to be shifts, and even in the more in the same direction, so to speak. It's not like reverting back to fluidity. It's like the college, non-college gap is going to be maybe even a little bigger than it was, right?

RON BROWNSTEIN:

Yeah. Yeah. Look, I think that Harris', I mean Harris' best ... What is Harris' pathway to victory? If you look at it demographically, it's to minimize the losses among Black and Latino men. Basically hold the line as much as possible among non-college whites, maybe by doing a little better among the women to offset what could be a little decline among the men. And then, to grow, to increase among the college whites, particularly the women. I mean, I think a scenario for her to win would be to basically keep down the losses among Black and Latino men, run even to Biden among college white men, improve a few points among college white women, and likewise improve a little among non-college white women to offset losses among non-college white men.

It's an election where, this is an election where gender and education gaps are widening, and racial and generational gaps are somewhat narrowing, right? I mean, that's kind of the interesting... We're looking at the education and gender lines within each racial group kind of really looming as the critical variable here.

BILL KRISTOL:

And within the age groups, as you said earlier, especially among young people, that was not predicted—

RON BROWNSTEIN:

Yeah. Among young people.

BILL KRISTOL:

... 10 years ago, I don't think, right? I mean...

RON BROWNSTEIN:

No. I was having this conversation with somebody a few days ago. Five years ago, I think certainly, and this is an important development that portends our politics, staying very closely competitive. Five years ago, I would've said that Republicans would have obviously struggled more with young women than young men, but also would've faced a lot of problems with young men because of the views they were expressing on all sorts of social issues relating to

inclusion and equity. But now, Donald Trump, there are some polls where he's running even among young men overall, and maybe he won't be able to do that, but he is going to run very competitively among men under 30. He's almost certainly going to win white men under 30.

And yes, she may have historic margins among young women, and again, young women vote more than young men, especially young men of color who are expressing interest in Trump in polls, yes. But his ability to fracture the electorate along lines of gender and education, some of it in backlash to him, some of it in attraction to him, has been very powerful, has reconfigured the electorate in a way, kind of a resorting. Now, I feel like if you look at the evidence in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, that this resorting since 2016 has resulted, until now, in a net advantage for Democrats, which have won almost everything in those states. But overall, on a national basis, this resorting is allowing Republicans to withstand the slight election-to-election shifts. And as I said in the composition of the voter pool, that is shrinking the group where they've done the best, the non-college whites, and increasing the presence of the groups where they have struggled the most in the Trump era, college whites and non-white voters.

BILL KRISTOL:

Just the stability as you said, the calcification, the trench warfare character. It all is so amazing because if someone had come down from Mars and said, "Okay, we're going to have this ex-president governs in a chaotic ... Wins, a very narrow, slightly flukish, electoral college victory, governs in a chaotic way, loses re-election, insurrection, January 6th, impeached but not convicted. Indictments, then gets re-nominated and is more Trumpy than he was four or eight years ago, I think we can say, or more expressly, more reckless in terms of violating various norms and conventions and so forth." On the one hand. And then were going to have the first Black female candidate on the other side, after the guy who had won the nomination steps aside in a totally unprecedented way in American politics. Biden leaves, Harris comes in. We would've, I think in a normal world I would say, "Oh my God, that's totally chaotic."

Who knows. Someone could be up 10 and then down 10, no one knew Harris. Trump both had won once and lost narrowly once, won narrowly once, lost narrowly once. But now with January 6th, wouldn't there be a huge turnover or resistance to him? And instead we've had all this novelty, you might say, and an election for the ages kind of thing. Biden getting out so late and so forth. And then at the end of the day it's gone from Biden drifting down to minus four or so nationally. He gets out, Harris goes back up to plus two or three, maybe three at the top now, maybe two nationally. And you look at the two lines on a chart, this unbelievable chaos, but it all doesn't seem to affect the electorate much.

RON BROWNSTEIN:

Well, and a bunch of polls out today have her still three or four nationally. Four seems exuberant, but maybe three. I guess I am a big Sides-Vavreck "calcification" devotee. And I will give you my own little gloss on it, because in some ways I think stuff I've written over the years relates to this too. First of all, because of this calcification, it's important to note, we're talking about before the number of contested states has shrunk to historic levels. 40 states have now voted the same way in at least the past four consecutive presidential elections, which is a higher share of the states voting the same way than even in the four consecutive elections that FDR won.

And of the 10 that have split at any time, four of them aren't really competitive. There are states that Obama won at one point but has since moved very securely into the Republican camp, Indiana, Iowa, Florida and Ohio. So we're down to six states that have flipped somewhere in the last few years, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin in the Rust Belt, North Carolina, Georgia and Arizona and the Sun Belt, they're the switchers. And then there's Nevada, which has voted Democratic four straight times, but is on the knife's edge. So first of all, the result of this demographic stability is a shrinking of the battlefield. I view the underlying cause of this stasis to be the transformation of our coalitions, to coalitions that once were organized more around class are now organized more around culture. And I wrote in 2012 before Trump came

on the scene after the election, looking at those results, I said that our politics now divides between a coalition of transformation and a coalition of restoration.

That the Democrats rallied the people and the places that were most comfortable with the way the country is changing demographically, culturally, and economically. All the cherries on the slot machine line up. Largely the people who are comfortable with a more diverse society in which gender roles are evolving are also generally comfortable with the transitions in the economy. And on the other side are the voters who feel most threatened or marginalized by all of these changes. The transformation to a more information age based economy, changing gender roles and family patterns. And also just the sheer amount of demographic change that we're living through that Obama came to symbolize. And if your affinity to one party or the other is based on your attitude about these fundamental evolutions in what it means to be an American, it's much harder to change that for current circumstances of any kind, like the economy ...

Both things are true. It is on the one hand remarkable that Trump is as competitive as he is given January 6th, multiple felony indictments, felony convictions, civil judgments on fraud and sexual assault, as you point out the visible evidence of his decline, not quite as pronounced as Biden, but unmistakable. The turn toward more overtly authoritarian, racist and just plain vulgar behavior. And so many Democrats, like people I ran into in Michigan, I was like, "How is this still an issue after that?" Well, you can look at it the other way. A significant majority of Americans, particularly working class voters across racial lines, say they are not better off because of the policies of the Biden administration and say that the policies of Trump helped them economically, whether that bears out or not, that the policy of Trump helped them economically more than the policies of Biden.

So you can look at that and say, "Well usually when that happens, the party in power gets waxed. How is Harris as competitive as she is with all that?" And I think it is because our fundamental alignment is based on culture, not class, based on the competing definitions of who is a legitimate American, what it means to be an American, and that there's only very little movement around the margins in a world separated by those views.

BILL KRISTOL:

And the candidates just matter less, which is something that people like me, maybe you too, who love politics, don't like in a way. We love the idea that a candidate can run a great campaign or a strategist, Lee Atwater and James Carville and it makes a huge difference. But they swapped out Biden for Harris. Has there ever been a better test of, "Let's swap out an incumbent president 50 years in public office, white working class origins, Catholic appeals to that, and let's swap him out for a Black woman from California who had never gotten a vote for president, actually." She is the vice president, of course.

RON BROWNSTEIN:

Right. Got out before—

BILL KRISTOL:

The campaign bombed out in 2019. And unknown ... I'm exaggerating, but little known certainly compared to Biden who'd been vice president years, you'd think huge variance. And the variance was actually the other way. Biden was too old, so she picked up some... But basically all the Biden voters are still for Harris with a tiny delta ... Not tiny, but a small delta increase of those—

RON BROWNSTEIN:

There has—

BILL KRISTOL:

In a certain way it's kind of astonishing. And in other ways you say it's totally explicable. If you believe in A, B, or C, or identify with A, B, or C, or D, E, and F, you're not going to change your mind just because it happens that the 80-year-old president isn't the candidate and the 59-year-old vice president is. You're just going to stick with that team. And the same of course with Trump, right?

RON BROWNSTEIN:

Yeah, for the vast majority of Americans, that's true. But I guess maybe I'm being acculturated to our modern system. It seems to me like a five-point increase for her relative to Biden is something. And there are a couple of things that we're going to test. In many ways the groups that seem to be moving the most, that are probably going to change the most from last time are the college-educated white women and the non-college-educated, younger, Black and Latino men. We're looking at the other groups. I'm not sure, is she going to do that much worse than Biden did with blue collar white men? He didn't do great. And I don't see evidence in the polls of a big decline. Could she do a little better than he did among the blue collar white women? Maybe. But I think it's going to end up really close again to where we were. College white men, that's a good wild card to me, man. That could go either way. She could do a couple points better or a couple points worse. They tend to be voters who would think that Trump ran the economy better, but they're married to college white women, a lot of them, who are really not going to accept them voting for Trump. So it does broadly validate the Sides-Vavreck "calcification theory."

But especially in the states that I think she has the best chance to win, her best place to grow are college white women in the suburbs, many of whom are probably the targets of efforts that you have been part of on the last few years. And she has to defend her margins among everybody else more or less. And I do think you're going to see a lot of polarization by place in this election. As I said, I was in Michigan over the last few days, and you really can see the basic structure of the race. And what I'm about to say is equally true for Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, although the minority population isn't as big in Wisconsin. Basically Trump has a pincer movement going. On the one side, he is trying to just slightly improve among economically marginal non-white voters—men mostly—in the big cities. And then he is counting on the usual towering Trump country advantages for him in places outside of the major metros and pressing on Harris from both ends.

And her best path to victory is to dent, blunt as much of that advance as she can in the central cities and grow in the white collar suburbs where Biden already improved over Hillary. So just the best example is the four suburban counties outside of Philadelphia, Hillary won them by about 180. Biden won them by over 290. 290,000 vote margin in those four counties. When you add it to Philadelphia and Pittsburgh and its inner suburbs, those basically six counties gave Biden a margin of over 900,000 votes. Now, Harris might have to do even a little better than that in those places because it is likely to me that the Scranton and Eries of the world will vote even a little more heavily for Trump than they did last time. But if she posts a 950,000 or 975,000 vote margin in the two major population centers, that would be her best chance.

I'm not sure there are enough other people to overcome that. And the same thing in Michigan where you've got Detroit and some other midsize cities with large Black populations where her goal is to hold down the erosion and then grow even further in Oakland County, which is the big suburban county outside Detroit, white collar suburban county where she was on Monday with Liz Cheney, Kent County, which is outside around Grand Rapids, and the county with Ann Arbor. And to finish the kind of travel log here, in Wisconsin, it's basically cut down the losses in the three big suburban counties outside Milwaukee, which are the most Republican leaning such counties anywhere left north of the Mason-Dixon line. Try to turn out a few more voters than Biden did in Milwaukee and then win the state mostly by pushing for astronomical margins in Dane County, which is Madison. State capital, flagship public university, big, I think biotech and financial growth there.

That's a place where we've gone from Hillary Clinton ... I'm doing this off the top of my head, but I think it's approximately right. Hillary Clinton winning about 70% of the vote there in 2016 in Dane County. Biden gets it to 75, Tony Evers in 2022 gets it to 79, and then that big state

supreme court election last year, they get it to 83 even as turnout is rising and it's the only place in the state really adding people. So to me, the formula is very similar across all of the Blue Wall states. Now, this is harder in North Carolina and Georgia because more of those suburban whites, including the college whites, are cultural conservatives. Many of them are evangelical Christians. She can't get the margins that she does in the northern tier battlefields. But this same model has worked for Democrats in the last few cycles in Arizona.

This is exactly what we're talking about. That's why Arizona has flipped because the suburbs of Phoenix have become more friendly to Democrats. And if she wins, I think there is a pretty clear model for how she does so, and it will be white Republican leaning women, and maybe the younger women of all races entering the electorate, who provide her best chance to grow over Biden, as opposed to cutting the losses from Biden 2020. I just think that's where she can grow the most. Maybe a little among some of those other groups we talked about, but probably not much.

BILL KRISTOL:

One of the things this travelogue, if you want to call it that, brings out so well, which I think is sometimes forgotten, is people talk so much about red states and blue states and geographical sorting, and of course there's a lot of truth to that. When I got to Washington, I think in '85, I think there were 26 states with a senator from each party. So more states than not had a Senate delegation with a Republican and a Democrat. Now there are, what, five? And it's going down to after West Virginia votes, there's going three states left, I think? It depends what happens in a couple of these [inaudible] of course.

RON BROWNSTEIN:

Wouldn't it be two?

BILL KRISTOL:

Two?

RON BROWNSTEIN:

If Brown, Tester and West Virginia all flip, now depending on ... If Trump wins, Republicans might win the Senate seats in some combination of Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin.

BILL KRISTOL:

If they don't.

RON BROWNSTEIN:

If they don't, you could be down to Collins and Johnson as Republicans in the states that Democrats usually win for president and the only split delegations.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, and that changes so much the character of our politics, to have this ... So I think it's right to have uni-party states that affect two senators, majority of the House delegation, usually the governor's from the same state, usually the presidential candidate carries the same state. So that's very different from the politics of even 40 years ago where Bush would routinely carry states with Democratic governors and vice versa and so forth. So the red state/blue state thing is real and important. But of course what's also amazing is, I would call it the geographical sociology, geo-economics sociology within the states. The metro areas are as different from the rural areas within the states.

RON BROWNSTEIN:

Exactly.

BILL KRISTOL:

More different than the states are from each other, right?

RON BROWNSTEIN:

And the metro areas and the rural areas are as different in red states as they are in blue states. So Biden in 2020 was the first Democrat since Lyndon Johnson in 1964 to win all four of the big metros in Texas. But he still lost because the rural areas have gotten even more Republican. The interior parts of California, Oregon and Washington, sparsely populated, more timber and natural resources and farming, they're overwhelmingly Republican. And as I said, the Metros and Texas, I think Salt Lake City. Didn't Biden win Salt Lake City and Boise? I think he won the county with Boise in it, or was at least very ... I'm a little short on my Idaho political history, but he was certainly competitive in Boise.

Basically you can draw an imaginary beltway around every major city in the country and inside of it, Democrats are generally getting stronger, and outside of it, Republicans are getting more dominant. The challenge for Harris is that Trump is definitely seeming in the polls, in position to crack a little bit more of that center city dominance among nonwhite voters than she is likely to make any improvement among the rural ex-urban small town voters in Trump country. And therefore, that's why my feeling is that these big inner suburbs, not the outer more white, sparsely populated, but the inner Panera land and Whole Foods land, that is where she has to go to grow her vote to offset any losses on either side of those places, the rural or the center city.

And I have felt this way for months. I was at a family wedding earlier this year in a suburb of Philadelphia, and I was looking at the parking lot of a Panera with whatever, it was probably a Michael's or all the things you would expect to find in a reasonably upscale mall. And there were people getting out of Teslas and Lexus SUVs, and I was thinking much like the Spanish Civil War, this is literally the front line, or maybe the last line of defense in the battle over democracy. Because I think if democracy gets saved, it's going to be some combination of enough inner city voters of color and racially diverse, but much more affluent inner suburb voters who do it.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, I was in Pennsylvania myself last weekend, but it's striking. People talk so much about the white working class and every newspaper sent out teams of reporters to go to white working class diners in 2017 and stuff.

RON BROWNSTEIN:

Yeah, they should go to Panera's too.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, but I think the reporting under, what's been under-reported is white college—

RON BROWNSTEIN:

Oh, yeah.

BILL KRISTOL:

... Especially white college men are not, I mean there's 50-50, they're not 80-20, so it's different from non-college, but they're not all Democrats or liberals. And Trump, especially among the men, has actually held a lot of that vote and that's what's made him, of course, competitive in these states.

RON BROWNSTEIN:

Yeah, yeah. I mean, they're roughly a 50-50 constituency. I think some of the analysis had Biden winning them slightly, and that is a place where Democrats could do a little better. Or like I said, if you think, we're in a world where gender and education are just so powerful in

shaping the vote, so if you think of white, and now I used to do this all the time and I think I've probably done it for you on a previous session that we've had. You can draw like quadrants among white voters. Right. And so where everything lines up for Republicans are men who are non-college and they are overwhelmingly Republican. And then where everything lines up for Democrats are women who are college and they are becoming more Democratic.

I mean, Kamala Harris will win those college educated white women by a lot more than Hillary Clinton did. Okay. But the conflicted groups are the ones where gender and education pull in the opposite direction. So you've got the non-college white women who I think are really critical in those blue wall states. They're a very big share of the electorate in all of them. They're more than a quarter of the voters in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. Historically, most of them nationally vote Republican. Clinton is the only Democrat since 1980 to win even a plurality of them. But those national numbers are inflated by what we were talking about before. Many of them in the South, many, many of them in the South are evangelical Christians. When you get to the Northern tier battlegrounds, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Democrats historically have been able to run a little better among them than they do nationally, somewhere in the low to mid 40s.

And I think if she can get to the low to mid 40s among those non-college white women, she'll be hard to beat in those states. I mean, that could get her there. And then of course the other conflicted group is the one you're talking about where gender and education pulling the opposite direction are the college white men. They tend to trust Republicans more on the economy. They like tax cuts and some of them, like the non-college men of all races respond to the kind of the macho Trump signaling about gender roles and this is a very dangerous time for men and all of that kind of stuff. But there Harris's job is to try to stay as close to even as she can.

BILL KRISTOL:

This whole conversation, of course, it's just been taking up for granted that we're at a one or two or three point race in the key states and that it's all very much at the margins and, which again has not been the case always in the past. I mean—

RON BROWNSTEIN:

No, things can break. Right.

BILL KRISTOL:

... Things broke open in the last week, right? I mean, things look even and [inaudible] won by nine. But you don't expect, I mean just, that would be surprising, right?

RON BROWNSTEIN:

That would be sur— [inaudible]. So I think part of the problem, I mean, Harris has had, there's no doubt that that Trump has won October more on television than in person, I think, and I think Harris was very late in making an important pivot. I mean, I wrote a story what 10 days ago saying that she was failing to articulate a sufficiently urgent case about Trump. To me that was really underscored by her big wave of media interviews when she went on Howard Stern, and *The View*, and the podcasts, and *60 Minutes*, Stephen Colbert.

Her overriding goal, the through line in all those interviews was basically personal reassurance, I thought, right? It was personal connection. It was basically her trying to say, I think primarily to women voters, I have lived your life so I get your life so I know what we can do to make your life better. But there was really no Trump messaging. I mean, there's a little bit on abortion, but no consistent, much less urgent warning about what a second Trump term would mean. And what I wrote in the story was the canary in the coal mine of the danger this was presenting for Democrats—and this is still true—was that Trump's retrospective job approval rating in both national and state polls was rising to a level that exceeded his actual approval rating at any time when he was president. And what that said to me—

BILL KRISTOL:

And that exceeded any approval rating for the Biden-Harris administration of course.

RON BROWNSTEIN:

Yes, totally, totally. And what that said to me is that people were judging Trump primarily through the lens, remembering Trump primarily through the lens of what they didn't like about Biden, particularly inflation and the border and everything else, all of the other things that kept his approval rating from actually reaching 50 when people were living through the conditions that they were now looking back on fondly. All of that was fading from view and she was allowing it to fade from view. Meantime, Trump was pounding her on television with a message that said she's soft on crime, soft on the border, extreme on transgender rights. She is an extreme cultural liberal who won't keep you safe.

And then of course in the rallies, his core message was immigrants are coming to kill you and she won't stop them. Or as I sometimes put it, people who don't look like you are coming to kill you and she won't stop them. Bill, I thought one word was an incredibly revealing window into his strategy when he took this to its biggest extreme at an event in Wisconsin in early October, and he said, he talked about the threat that immigrants will cut your throat. He said, "They will come in your kitchen door and cut your throat." He didn't say they'll come in the front door where a man might be. He didn't say they'll come in the living room where a man might be. He said they'll come in the kitchen where I think especially in a lot of these households we're talking about, the woman can envision herself alone preparing dinner.

I'm not sure how many men are cutting the zucchini and the green peppers and the tomatoes in the kitchen. And it was his core message. She will not keep you safe, and she's a cultural liberal. And her message was, I thought, very diffuse. Now that pivoted last Monday night in Erie when she started showing the videos of him, and now she is back to very aggressively and particularly the audience we're talking about, to kind of suburban upper middle class America, reminding them that there's more involved in re-electing Trump than cheaper gas and eggs. Did she wait too long? Did that add-on slot do too much damage in the way that they're saying, well, we don't think it's moved that many voters and we don't think we have to respond. I have heard that before. I think that was what the Dukakis campaign said about Willie Horton.

So that was a turning point in a bad way for her, I think. It allowed Trump to gain the momentum and the upper hand, at least in driving the dialogue in these states. And now she is back and very clearly betting the ranch on enough people saying, this is too big a risk, even if I think it might be a little better for my bottom line, and we'll see whether she got there too late or whether she can in fact rally enough people. Trump's certainly giving her plenty of help on this front, right, with his behavior. The enemy from within doubling down on it. He thinks it turns out his base, it could also turn out a lot of high propensity college educated suburban voters to stop him.

BILL KRISTOL:

You think it seems, I actually had an argument with someone this morning about this. I'm very interested. He said, look, I love what you guys have done to Republican voters against Trump and *The Bulwark* and all that. Nice, lovely Sarah, your friend, colleague, Sarah Longwell got to moderate the event with Liz Chaney and Vice President Harris and outside Philadelphia. But I wonder if it's a mistake, this person who's pro-Harris, this intelligent strategist said, because polling all shows that the economic message still is the most important and Harris is making progress and chipping away at Trump's economic advantage, judgment on inflation. And management of the economy was not so overwhelmingly pro-Republican, is not now in the polls as it was two months ago, made up some of the damage you might say, done by Biden and inflation and so forth.

And is this just reinforcing voters who already are with her? This is all in, "baked in," I've heard that phrase so many times as you have in the last yeah, week or two, and I mean, I want since I, personally this is what moves me. I mean, I like the democracy message and the Dobbs message, which is a personal freedom message that's related to a liberties message you might

call it. And for that message, I think Republican validators can be useful because it sort of makes it not just a partisan attack, but a kind of country first attack. But I don't know, maybe we just like this message and she is better off running tens of millions dollars more ads on her grandparents, healthcare, what am I trying to say? Generation, senior healthcare, that kind of stuff. I mean, it's not my preference, but could it be right, I guess that's what I, and what have you seen that makes you or is that even a trade-off? Can you do both? I mean—

RON BROWNSTEIN:

Yeah, right. Well, first of all, I mean obviously as is usually the case in politics, it's not absolute that one version is indisputably superior to the other. But I do think on balance that she is not going to win the election if voters are basically asking who is better for my bottom line? Now—

BILL KRISTOL:

You can't fix that this late, right? I mean—

RON BROWNSTEIN:

You can't fix that this late. I mean, the overwhelming sense among voters, that the Biden administration failed them economically because of inflation, which has eclipsed all of his other legit accomplishments, this very strong job market, the increase in wages over the last couple years, the incredible wave of private sector investment triggered mostly in manufacturing, mostly in red counties, mostly in places in Trump country triggered by the Inflation Reduction Act and the infrastructure bill. All of those are real accomplishments. Most voters would think that ... would judge his economic record and thus his presidency really I think as a failure because inflation in the first few years, which is now more under control, but still cumulatively squeezing people quite a bit, has just alienated so many voters. And I think they have done a very good job of trying to counteract that verdict by encouraging voters to look forward and basically saying, who's on your side, who will fight for you?

And she has made progress on that. And I think part of her closing message has to be that Trump isn't really fighting for you, but I guess if you force me to choose, I would say that if you keep this in a conventional frame, it's hard for her to win when 60% of the country almost disapproves of the outgoing president. I think if we look back through the history we have with the modern history of polling, which basically goes back to 1948, a popular president cannot guarantee victory for their party when they leave. So like Eisenhower in '60 and Clinton in 2000, but an unpopular president usually guarantees defeat like Truman in '52, Nixon. Well, Johnson in '68, right? I mean, Bush in a way—

BILL KRISTOL:

Carter obviously.

RON BROWNSTEIN:

Carter. Well Carter, he lost himself.

BILL KRISTOL:

Himself. But yeah.

RON BROWNSTEIN:

Yeah. So I'm saying if the president steps down and he's popular—

BILL KRISTOL:

Right.

RON BROWNSTEIN:

There's no guarantee you're going to win. I think the history so far is that the president steps down and he is unpopular, it's pretty likely you're going to lose, and therefore I think you have to enlarge the frame. You really have to enlarge the frame, and you can't let the dominant image of Trump be that the economy was better and all of this other crazy stuff he talked about, did it really happen? Was it really that bad? We could live through it again and maybe he'll get the border and the economy under control. I think allowing that to sit as much as they have is the reason they're in the situation they're in and allowing it to sit all the way to election day, I think in the end would've guaranteed that the underlying forces, the dynamic of disapproval of the outgoing president and the state of the country would've sealed their fate.

BILL KRISTOL:

I mean, another Democrat said to me—and I have some sympathy with this—that, “Harris is winning the campaign, the candidate war and the campaign war—better campaign. Trump's winning the paid media war, the advertising war.”

RON BROWNSTEIN:

Totally. That is such an important point. The week before the first debate, a Republican strategist said to me that, "If we win this election, it won't be because of the interactions between Trump and Harris, either at the debates or in the day-to-day driving of the news cycles. If we win the election, it will be because we basically run the campaign against her that we've run against Democrats for senator and governor forever in these swing states, basically portraying them as an extreme cultural liberal who are soft on crime and immigration and won't keep you safe." It's basically, like whatever craziness is happening around Trump, when he's talking about Arnold Palmer's junk or Hannibal Lecter, whatever is happening with Trump himself. That campaign, that ad campaign is like motoring forward. It's *The Terminator*. It just keeps going every day. You can't reason with it. You can't bargain with it, as Michael Biehn said. I mean, it just keeps going.

And if they beat her, that will be the principle reason why. Plus you can't ignore that there are a lot of voters who are saying they are okay with this even more overtly racist, xenophobic, authoritarian version of Trump, and that is a challenge the country's going to face going forward, whatever happens in this election. I think people may have thought that after 2020 Trump loses, the Republican Party would turn back in a more conventional direction. I'm not sure him losing this time does that. If he loses twice in a row, and I think even if he loses, he says it was stolen and he presents himself as the front-runner for 2028.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, that's a very good point. I mean, we can discuss that when you come back on after the election and we'll know who's won or we may not quite know who's won, but we'll know what's happened, at least to a considerable degree. The—

RON BROWNSTEIN:

Yeah. I mean, can I interject just real quick? I mean, it turns out that Trumpism, while probably incapable of winning the national popular vote, is capable because of the, kind of the kinks in the electoral college and certainly the Senate, it is capable of remaining competitive even in a diversifying country. Now, eventually we could get to a point where that's not true, where just the sheer decline in the voters that it's relying on most, but if he can in fact broaden this sort of non-college populist coalition to include more non-college men of color, and you combine that with the advantage that the electoral college and especially the Senate for those small, those lightly populated, predominantly white Christian, rural, small states, it can stay competitive even if it can't command a national majority, which is going to make it harder to build a kind of critical mass in the party that says, well, this is an absolute dead end.

BILL KRISTOL:

So more technical question. You said Harris pivoted and she now shows the clips of Trump at the rally and now she's going to Texas on Friday to highlight the abortion, reproductive rights, but also women's maternal health kind of issues.

RON BROWNSTEIN:

Yeah.

BILL KRISTOL:

And she was with Cheney yesterday and doing the kind of democracy rule of law constitution themes quite effectively, I thought. But do you believe, what I can't tell is, is her paid advertising doing that too though? Or I still see a fair number of ads that are pretty, soft isn't quite fair, but kind of she's middle class, she has a good economic agenda, she'll help you with healthcare. And again, there are people who think that is in fact the war. That tests better.

RON BROWNSTEIN:

The super PAC has done a lot of that.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. And then they say—

RON BROWNSTEIN:

And they're getting some criticism.

BILL KRISTOL:

Well, if you look and ask people, people like it better and my answer to that, but I don't know if I'm right, is well, what tests better against some abstract poll whether you care the most about healthcare and they say, yes, I care. I care a lot about it. Wait a minute. Do you like this ad? Yes, I like it. Does it really change their vote though? That's what I guess, I'm worried that they're running a campaign that's a little, I don't know, data-driven is not quite the right word, but it's a little bit, sort of the poll shows 78% healthcare and 64% this. So we're going to do the healthcare ad, but that's not quite the way politics works.

RON BROWNSTEIN:

Yeah, the closest thing I think they've done in volume in their advertising are various versions of ads showing people that work for him saying he's unfit to be president again.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yes.

RON BROWNSTEIN:

And I don't know if that's pointed enough. But yeah, I mean a Democratic pollster told me, for example, the home healthcare thing is very popular. It's very popular among women who are the primary caregivers in the sandwich generation. And certainly this would make, if you combine, I'm surprised she didn't mention this yesterday because when she was asked about the sandwich generation. They're proposing that you limit the share of your income that you have to spend on childcare to what ... 7, 8% of your income would be. After that you would get federal tax breaks that passed as part of Build Back Better in the House in '21. She's revised it, revived it and coupling that with this very significant proposal to have not Medicaid but Medicare pay for home healthcare and now with Medicaid, people have to spend down all their assets before they can get any of that help. Under Medicare, you don't have to do that. So this is policy very targeted at middle-aged women, especially those without degrees who have less resources usually than those with degrees and are married to men with degrees. And yet Democratic pollsters told me that it doesn't really move the needle. They love it, but if they

think immigrants are coming to kill them and Trump will keep them safe, or if they have been convinced that Harris is going to let their school ship their kid out for a daytime sex change operation before they get back on the bus at three o'clock, that this isn't enough to overcome it.

BILL KRISTOL:

Also to say the discount for promises is greater probably than the discount for fears. Yeah, well, they all promise things and they promised this before and promised that before. And so I think it's a lot of swimming upstream when you promise a government program whereas maybe you're swimming a little ... Is downstream the right way to say it? When you're sort of increasing—

RON BROWNSTEIN:

With the current.

BILL KRISTOL:

Fear.

RON BROWNSTEIN:

Well, look, like I said before, I think by many conventional metrics it is as remarkable that Harris is competitive as it is that Trump is as competitive, given how dissatisfied people are. We can argue about whether wages in fact in the last few years have exceeded the growth in prices, but most people feel like they are worse off because of inflation than they were before the pandemic. And she has effectively chipped away at that, kind of changed the frame a little bit by getting people to focus on the future and who will fight for you. "I'll fight the drug companies, I'll fight energy." All of that has been effective and even after all of it, Trump still usually leads by 10 or 12 points when people are asked who they trust to handle the economy and she does better on some other measures. I know we're going to get calls or whatever the equivalent is, going to get comments, people saying, "Well, no, no, no, she's better on inflation."

I think if you're in a conventional frame, "Who is better on the economy?" She can't get there. But this can fairly pre-present it and it is not an exaggeration to say, "This is not that. This is an election that implicates much bigger, broader questions about the future of America from a militarized effort to deport 11 million people to these open pledges to use the National Guard or the military against the enemy within and to weaponize the justice..." I go back to this interview he did with Time Magazine months ago where he said, "Yes, I believe I would be in my right as president to fire a US attorney who would not initiate an investigation of a specific person I tell them to investigate under any circumstances."

Arguing about home healthcare, obviously you have to do that and I know the political scientists who study this point out that around the world parties running against quasi-authoritarian parties always have this debate, this conundrum, "Do you run a normal campaign? Do you focus on the price of bread and eggs or do you run a campaign about this unique risk?" Think you have to do both. She's done a lot of the first, now she's finishing with the latter. We'll see if it was too late. We'll see if it's enough and it may be there are just too many people in the country who are okay with this.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. Well, that is a huge question and we'll know more about that, I suppose, after the election. Two final questions for now. What would you ask...? This will come out tomorrow or Thursday, this conversation. What would you suggest people look for in the last 10 days in terms of the campaigns or other things they'll learn, maybe data, I suppose, just that would influence their thinking about what's going to happen? And then secondly, this one might be more useful or more answerable, you'll get the exit polls, I don't know, at 5:00 PM, 5:30 PM at CNN on Tuesday night, on election day. The rest of us will see them at 7:00 PM or so I think. The national polls at least. What will you look for? What would be sort of an indicator that,

"This is working. This worked or this didn't work," or really Harris or Trump it looks like are doing better than we expected? Is there a particular question apart from the ballot test, obviously? But I mean a particular, I don't know, anything you—

RON BROWNSTEIN:

I mean, I would say, "Is she winning among women more than he's winning among men?" Would be the first thing I'll be looking for. And the answer to that will depend heavily upon what's happening with those non-college white women and those non-college non-white men. That's probably going to tell us the answer to that question, but the first thing I will look for is he winning among men by more than she's winning among women or vice versa.

BILL KRISTOL:

Any issue that you would look for or are those questions overrated in these polls, that it's more—?

RON BROWNSTEIN:

I think they're overrated.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, I do too.

RON BROWNSTEIN:

I mean I think they're overrated. I mean people say the economy... The other thing would be the retrospective job approval on Trump. I mean that would be the other thing that's really going to be worth watching. If that's at 50, whoo, that's going to be tough for her. Your—

BILL KRISTOL:

In the run-up to the election, I'd want to see a poll next weekend or after next weekend when the *Times* or *Post* goes back in the field for a last time what the retrospective job approval for Trump would be. Would you want to see that? Tell me what you would want to see in those polls.

RON BROWNSTEIN:

Yeah, I mean that goes to your point about what I'd be watching in the last... I think Mike Podhorzer, the former political director of the AFL-CIO, who's kind of like a behind-the-scenes guru/godfather of progressive political analysis and maybe some political action, but mostly the people who kind of think about messaging and polling and so forth, he points out... He has... And maybe only famously to me because written about it several times. He has calculated from data generated by Catalyst, which is a very good Democratic targeting company that targets voters, Mike has calculated—

BILL KRISTOL:

And this is data ... just to interrupt ... So, I wrote about it this week too, and this is data that he gets from the voter file itself.

RON BROWNSTEIN:

Yeah, from the voter files.

BILL KRISTOL:

Not polling. How do you weigh it? How do you adjust it? This is actual human data.

RON BROWNSTEIN:

Actual... Yeah. And maybe you know this, but Mike has calculated that in the last four elections, a combined 91 million separate individuals, 91 million separate human beings, have come out to vote in at least one of those four elections against Trump and Trumpism. Whereas 83 million people over those four elections have come out to vote for Trump or Trumpism. So that's what leads him and Simon Rosenberg and some others who are battling over the copyright to talk about what they describe as the anti-MAGA majority in America. But the question, I think, in the last 10 days... Mike has said for a year that he thinks the election will be decided by what is the question in the last 10 days? What are we talking about? Are we talking about, "Are you better off than you were four years ago?"

In which case, Trump could be in position to narrowly squeeze out an electoral college victory or is the dominant dialogue that Trump is a threat to your rights, your values and democracy itself, which is what he believes is needed to activate the least engaged voters at the penumbra—or the edge—of that anti-MAGA coalition. And Harris is clearly turning up the volume on that. As I said, I thought she really missed an opportunity by not doing that in any of her big media hits early in the month. And there's a lot of headwinds in the terms of the economic dissatisfaction that people face. But I do think that her best chance is not so much to convert Trump voters as to envelop them, kind of overwhelm them by bringing in as much as you can of this broad coalition that really doesn't want and has shown us that they don't... At least in the states that matter, they have shown us they don't want to live in the America that Trump has on offer. They don't. They don't want to live in a world where the National Guard is going from Indiana, as Stephen Miller has explained, is going to be going door to door in Chicago, rooting out people who are undocumented even if their kids are US citizens. I'm not sure a majority... People in polls say that they support that. That would last about an hour once it actually started happening. And everything else that goes with Trump. I will turn your question around and I will say the question will be, "What is the question?"

BILL KRISTOL:

That's good. Well, we'll see what the question is over the next 12 days.

RON BROWNSTEIN:

That's why I do this for a living.

BILL KRISTOL:

That's good. That was good. That's an appropriate thing to—

RON BROWNSTEIN:

That's kind of like the blue wall, you know, I mean...

BILL KRISTOL:

That worked out great in 2016. Is that your term? That is your term.

RON BROWNSTEIN:

Yes. I coined "the blue wall" in 2009, but can I say a funny thing before we go?

BILL KRISTOL:

"The blue wall," for people that people don't know, that was Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania.

RON BROWNSTEIN:

No. See, this is the problem. This is what's happened. When I coined "the blue wall" in 2009 and I could actually hold up the cover story in *National Journal* called "The Blue Wall," and in fact the lead of my story was, "Call it the blue wall." And "the blue wall" referred to the 18 states that had voted democratic in every election from '92 ultimately through 2012. It was the

most states the party had won that often in its history. And if I remember correctly, it's the most states that any party had won over six elections.

BILL KRISTOL:

Six elections.

RON BROWNSTEIN:

Trump in 2016 famously dislodged Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin from the blue wall before Biden won them again in 2020. When people talk about the blue wall now, as you did, the vast majority of them are talking only about Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. The irony for me as the father of “the blue wall” is that it's the bricks that fell out of the wall that have become the wall now in the popular imagination and vernacular. Subtle difference, but if you notice in my stories, I always describe them as “the former blue wall states of Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin,” which harkens back to the now-traduced trodden-over original definition of “the blue wall.”

Although I have to say I've had other phrases that have lasted wine track, beer track for the primaries, coalition of the ascendant for the Obama era coalition. Coining something like “the blue wall” and having people still using it routinely, regularly, almost reflexively 15 years later is kind of gratifying even if like a raincoat, it has been turned inside out.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, well, that's the question. Like Marx and Hegel and every other political philosopher in history complains about his—

RON BROWNSTEIN:

Coinage.

BILL KRISTOL:

People that start using his terms and saying they're Marxists, but they don't understand Marx at all. And I feel like—

RON BROWNSTEIN:

Yeah, they're the blue-wallians.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right, they're not. Exactly, but still better maybe to have the—

RON BROWNSTEIN:

And by the way... So Democrats have won the other 15 blue all states also in '16 and '20. I should go back and figure... And they're going to win all of them again, the other 15 original blue wall states. So that will be 15 states over nine consecutive elections. I mean, just think about how remarkable that is. By the way, one other related point. If Harris wins the popular vote, which still seems more likely than not, Democrats will have won it an eight of the past nine. No coalition, no matter how dominant has ever done that. The best ever was seven popular vote victories over nine presidential elections by the McKinley, Roosevelt, Taft, Harding, Coolidge, Hoover Republicans 1896 to 1932, and then the Democrats, FDR, Truman through Kennedy and Johnson, '32 to '68. They each won seven out of nine. Democrats are about to win in all likelihood eight out of nine.

And it is worth noting that in those two previous periods, the party that won seven out of nine never won the popular vote and lost the electoral college and Democrats are at risk of this happening for the third time in their current streak. And what's more, and maybe this is the thought to close on, there's a reasonable chance that if Trump wins, Republicans will win

unified control of government while losing the presidential popular vote. They did that in 2016, they did that in 2000 and before that in American history, it had happened only once in 1888. So we are drifting into a real... I don't know if we're drifting, we've kind of surfed the rapids into a real crisis of majority rule in this country that again is a problem whatever happens in November, and I will stop now because we both have to go.

BILL KRISTOL:

No, that was very interesting and maybe an appropriate close. We will talk right after the election in a little over two weeks and we will see what we've learned or what's happened and you'll analyze it.

RON BROWNSTEIN:

Have a great—

BILL KRISTOL:

But thank you so much for helping us think about it.

RON BROWNSTEIN:

I appreciate it. But before I go, can I ask you the question you asked me. What will you be watching for most on election night?

BILL KRISTOL:

No, I don't know. I think the Trump retrospective on the economy is important, but I guess I would want to know... I'm not sure what I'll look for in the exit polls, but I am sort of all in partly because it's just my preference and partly because I do think it's true what you said, that you've got to get people more... And Podhorzer argued this very eloquently in that long memo that you and I both have quoted, I think, in the last few days. People need to be more alarmed about a Trump second term. And I think people like me honestly haven't done as good a job as you might have in explaining why a Trump second term will be much more dangerous than a Trump first term. And that's hard because, of course, voters' instinct is to say, "You say it's that dangerous. I don't know. We had a first term of Trump, we saw already... He's not some unknown guy you're telling me." So to be fair... And I'm not really criticizing the Harris campaign. I think it's been on the whole a very good campaign actually.

RON BROWNSTEIN:

I agree.

BILL KRISTOL:

But you bring home in his last 10 days with the assistance of Liz Cheney and others, the unique threat, the riskiness, the unhinged, unstable, unchecked, that whole rhetoric about Trump. I don't care quite as much. I don't have a view of exactly which angle of it is the best to do, "He's going to take away your freedoms. He's going to have a coup. He's going to deport 15 million people," tend to generally convey the riskiness of a second term. I tend to agree with you. If people do not go on election day of some number of swingish voters and less well-informed voters... Honestly don't go in thinking, "Too much of a risk, too much... We just can't take that risk with Trump again." I think people need to be in that mindset probably for Harris to win, just given the fact that she's the vice president of an unpopular administration. And in the era, in the last, what, five, six years since Covid, four years since Covid, incumbent governments have lost—

RON BROWNSTEIN:

Around the world.

BILL KRISTOL:

In most democracies, right?

RON BROWNSTEIN:

By the way, the word that was doing... I think the most important word in your whole answer was Liz Cheney, and others. Others could matter. We haven't heard from some of the major others, maybe we're not going to. But you do wonder is there a Milly interview on *60 Minutes* or the equivalent?

BILL KRISTOL:

Or Bush. I mean, in a way, after resisting so long stepping, would Bush—

RON BROWNSTEIN:

Probably not. Probably none of this is going to happen. Yeah.

BILL KRISTOL:

I know. But if they finally said, "It's unacceptable," it might have a pretty big effect. All it takes is 1% of the voters to listen, or less.

RON BROWNSTEIN:

And again, I do think those Republican-leaning college voters who are doing pretty well, inflation is an annoyance for them, but it's not an existential challenge in the way it is for a lot of working-class people ... I think they are open to that message if they hear it and the messengers matter, and whether anyone else of stature comes out and says that could be important between now and the finish line. Like I said before, Trump as you agree, I mean Trump is certainly helping with his behavior and I think he assumes that the more outrageous he is, the more likely it is that he turns out his infrequent voters. I mean, I don't think this is just madness or just erratic behavior. I think he believes that the more windows he breaks, the more attention he captures among people who don't pay a lot of attention to politics. But can you make him pay a cost for that among people who are much more likely to show up in the first place? We can do this all day. We've got to stop.

BILL KRISTOL:

We could do this all day. We've got to stop. We'll be back in two weeks. And Ron Brownstein, thank you so much for joining me again.

RON BROWNSTEIN:

Great to be with you, now as in 1986.

BILL KRISTOL:

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