

# CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

BILL KRISTOL:

Hi, I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome back to *Conversations*. I'm very pleased to be joined today, September 8, 2022, by my friend, Bill Galston, Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution. Served in the Clinton White House, very intelligent, shrewd, perceptive observer, analyst, and occasional participant in, American politics, particularly the politics of the Democratic party. His piece from the late '80s, "The Politics of Evasion," very important in laying the groundwork for Bill Clinton's victory in '92, which Bill was part of and served in the Clinton White House, as I think I said.

And then recently reissued "The Politics of Evasion," co-authored I should say, with Elaine Kamarck, in terms of today's Democratic party, in which we'll have a broader talk, actually, about the maybe in early 2023, about the Democratic party and its prospects after this midterm election and where it's going. I should also mention Bill also has a weekly *Wall Street Journal* column, which is a must read, but for now, I thought Bill would be a very helpful analyst of the politics of abortion, an issue that some people, I guess, expected to be a big deal this fall, but I don't know if... It sort of a little bit came out of the blue. It didn't come out of the blue. It came out of the Supreme Court, so I thought I'd begin just with the current moment, and then we could have a broader discussion of where this goes, but...

So it's September 8th, as I mentioned. It's two months exactly before the election. Has the Supreme Court's reversal of Roe proved to be a big... Well, do we know yet if it's a big deal politically? Is it, right now at least, looking like it really will be a bigger issue in the fall elections than people might have expected? Talk about the current politics of abortion.

BILL GALSTON:

Yeah. Well, like you Bill, I had a hunch early on that it would be a big deal, and I think that hunch is being borne out by events. I'm sure everybody who's watching or listening to this is aware of what I'm about to say, but the first indication was the amazingly wide margin by which the referendum in Kansas was defeated, 18 percentage points. I don't think anybody thought it would be like that. I certainly didn't. I thought there was a chance.

Subsequently, some special elections that were thought to be leaning Republican have gone the Democrats' way, including a special election for a Congressional seat in New York, where the Democrat prevailed by two points in a district that was thought to be leaning pretty strongly Republican, and where there was an entirely credible Republican candidate, Marc Molinaro I think his name was. In addition, there's all sorts of evidence from party registration figures since the Dobbs decision overturning Roe was handed down, that women are disproportionately registering, more Democrats than Republicans. The recorded level of Democratic enthusiasm for participating in the midterms is moving up closer to the Republican level of enthusiasm, eroding their advantage. I could go on. I just read one analysis suggesting that the Dobbs decision may be responsible for all or most of the three percentage point increase in the so-called generic ballot for the House of Representatives. There's just a mountain of evidence all pointing in the same direction.

In addition, it has done two things for Democratic candidates. A, it has infused them with what Keynes famously called animal spirits, right? It gave them energy, or to vary the metaphor yet

again, it put wind in their sails, and in addition, it gave a focus for campaigns that previously lacked a focus. It puts Democrats on offense, particularly in states or against candidates who have adopted positions on limiting or banning abortion outright, that the majority of the American people see as extreme.

BILL KRISTOL:

No, that's very helpful, and you've raised in passing about four things I now want to follow up on, so I'm uncertain about the order, but let me hold off a couple of questions.

BILL GALSTON:

That's what the lead paragraph is supposed to do, right?

BILL KRISTOL:

That's good. Yeah, yeah, yeah, and sort of how it could be played differently in different states and with different candidates, which as you mentioned, Molinaro was not easily labeled a kind of extremist, or crazy, whatever, pro-life, but... So that would suggest, and the generic Congressional ballot I guess, suggests that it has a broader effect on the two parties.

But let's take five minutes out of the actual... I mean, you said you anticipated, and I think you and I were both on this side of thinking this is sort of a bigger deal than people think, but say a word about why. I mean, the political class, which tends to sort of homogenize everything. You know, gas prices is important, and this latest speech of someone which is a two-day story is important, and I don't know, this scandal somewhere in the country is going to have national repercussions, and this is important, and that's important.

I feel like there was a failure to appreciate that you're talking about a 50-year precedent, but anyway, you talk about why this might be sort of different from your typical days, or weeks, or even month or two long issue.

BILL GALSTON:

Well, think of it in market terms. When do markets move? Answer: when expectations are disrupted. After nearly half a century, Roe and relatively open access to abortion had been built into the baseline of expectations for American women. And suddenly, it gets taken away. One of the axioms of behavioral economics is that the pain of loss exceeds the pleasure of gain. This is a big loss, and a lot of women who were, I think it's fair to say, ambivalent about abortion, which is not an unreasonable stance all things considered, viewed the decision as opening the door to regimes of restraint and even inquiry, the use of information on the internet against you, that they hadn't really experienced since they were kids. And now they're grandmothers, and they're worried about their daughters and granddaughters.

It was not only a policy shock. I think it was an emotional shock. But it was the kind of emotional shock that didn't lead people to quiet resignation. It energized them, because now that it's been returned to the states and with a midterm election closing in, people have ways to act to express their shock and discontent, and it's happening.

BILL KRISTOL:

It is striking, and don't you think also, it made a difference that... I mean, it's been sort of pervasive. Everyone can imagine circumstances that might come up, that might affect, if not oneself of course, but one's family members, or it has affected close family members or friends, and if you're a young person, it's more your own decisions, and if you're a mother or grandmother, as you say, or father or grandfather. But I also think people underestimated the importance of the fact that it was a five to four decision.

Again, not that most voters are analyzing Supreme Court decisions super closely or whatever, but this was clear... A five four decision. Most of these big decisions are... Roe v. Wade was seven two. A little broader spectrum, you might say, of justices, and it was entirely a court... Well, three of the five were put on the court by Donald Trump in the last four years, so it was sort of not like the court has been moving in this direction for quite a while, and there were some appointees of Obama and some of Bush, who were kind of on board, and this is... You can dislike the decision, or you can say, as people do to other decisions, "This was an overreach," but it would sort of have a certain kind of grudging legitimacy, you might say.

Whereas here, it just... If you were already inclined to distrust the court, distrust the way some of these judges got on, distrust then, as you say, the attempt to impose this as an overturn of a 49-year-old precedent by a five four decision with three judges who were appointed in the last four years, I think that just compound... That made it easier for people to lose their usual some deference to and respect for judicial decisions. I also think it was... I'm curious if you agree with this. I don't think people paid close attention to Chief Justice Roberts' concurrence, I guess technically, since he was for upholding the law, but dissent against overturning Roe v. Wade.

For me at least, there was a certain kind of elite class, I would say it had a sort of, yeah, you could be a Roberts conservative and not an Alito conservative. You didn't have to sign on to some... the Democrats in a sense, right? So one was able to be against this... or a critic of this decision without being on the left, necessarily.

BILL GALSTON:

That's absolutely correct. And there is a range of stances among people who are sort of generically pro life. My sense is that the sweet spot, for what it's worth, is something within haling distance of the 15-week cutoff. I've done a lot of research into public opinion on the question, and I think most people regard that as, roughly speaking, reasonable, and if you deviate too far from that in either direction, you end up being regarded as out of the mainstream. So an outright ban, particularly bans that don't even make exceptions for rapes and incest are just seen as beyond the pale. So from a political standpoint, from a standpoint of public acceptance and of the perceived legitimacy of the court, it would have been much, much better for the majority to rally around the Roberts position as opposed to the position they finally did.

BILL KRISTOL:

And how much of an effect do you think the extremism of some Republican candidates in primaries, and some of them won their primaries, out of some of the law, the application of some of the laws that triggered in after the decision... Has that played a role also, in making pro-life just seem generically more extreme than perhaps it might otherwise have been?

BILL GALSTON:

That's hard to judge, but I wouldn't be a bit surprised, and it is frequently the case that parties or factions are judged by the loudest and most extreme expressions of their views. This would not be the first time that's happened by a long shot. It's happened to Democrats over and over again, particularly in recent years, on issues having to do with criminal justice, immigration, schools, et cetera. And now the Republican party is learning what it feels like to be on the wrong side of that dynamic, which they are in this case.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, you're right. I mean, if you're already sort of on the wrong side of public opinion, and then you've got a few people, or more than a few sometimes, on your side taking the extreme version of the wrong side, it does more damage, right? To the party as a whole.

BILL GALSTON:

And it's also triggered discussion of a parade of horrors. For example, this whole question of whether states would try to extend their jurisdiction across their borders, and try to restrict or punish people who've gone to another state with a different abortion regime, that hasn't played well. The idea of checking out social media in order to try to get to the question of why you were traveling, for example. It wasn't just to see grandma. All of this, I think, has played into the sense of intrusion, overreach, restraint on liberties, and just the flight from common sense.

BILL KRISTOL:

So, you mentioned the generic Congressional ballot. I looked it up last night. On May 2nd, when the Alito draft was leaked, the Republicans were up +2.6 and the 538 average. June 24th, when the opinion was issued, they were still up 2.3, so the draft didn't have that much of an effect in any way. Maybe other things of course were going on, that's one has to stipulate always. Gas prices had come down in the summer and so forth. But now, and the Democrats are up by one point in the generic ballot, so that's a more than a three point shift since in the what is it, two-and-a-half months since the decision. Which is, I mean, it doesn't sound like that much, but for a generic ballot, it's a fair move, and certainly against the trend or against the expectation of the Republicans building on the quote "wave." That's what the image means, right? The wave builds up. But it turns out that the undertow was perhaps stronger, but do you...

So it's two months from election day. What do you... I mean, two questions I guess. Do you think it could... Have we seen most of the effect? Does it continue? Does it sort of recede some? And secondly, the preceding question that you and I both alluded to, I mean, how much is this a universal effect, Congressional elections, Senate and House. How much is much more specific to those candidates who are more extreme? And third, I'll just throw them all out here and you can answer them in the order you choose, does it affect, insofar as it's mostly a state issue, presumably, maybe not if there's federal legislation, how much does it affect a governor election more than a Senate election?

BILL GALSTON:

Well, let's go from back to front, if I can remember the front.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, I wrote them down so I can remember those.

BILL GALSTON:

Good, good.

BILL KRISTOL:

Otherwise, I'm sure [inaudible].

BILL GALSTON:

I know how you operate. How many backs of how many envelopes do you have in front of you?

BILL KRISTOL:

Exactly, right? Okay. So distinguish federal and state.

BILL GALSTON:

Yeah. I'd say it will have an effect on gubernatorial elections where the Republican gubernatorial candidate has taken a stance that's substantially outside the mainstream. And I

can't think of a single democratic gubernatorial candidate who wouldn't move to exploit that if that's the situation. So you'd have to go candidate by candidate. If memory serves, DeSantis is in a reasonably good position on the issue. Doesn't Florida have a 15 week law?

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah.

BILL GALSTON:

Well, he can—

BILL KRISTOL:

Which he touts as a pro-life law, which is fine by me, but it's a funny way. He can get away with that, right? He has the best of both—

BILL GALSTON:

See, in the current context, I think that he can stand on that and defend it and not be hurt too bad. But I'd be very interested to dive deeper into the utterances on the subject of people like Doug Mastriano in Pennsylvania or the Republican gubernatorial candidate in Arizona, which is a state with more of a libertarian public culture than just about any place else, except maybe Alaska. There are states where gubernatorial contests could very well revolve around this issue, and conceivably in very close races could be determined by it.

BILL KRISTOL:

One more thing on just the states. It was a recent poll, you saw it as well, from Michigan, a reputable pollster, which showed just an unbelievable gender gap. I believe that the Republican was ahead of governor Whitmer by one point among men and losing by 25 points among women. It's almost hard to believe that that could be quite correct, but it is what it is, a real poll, and it ends up with Whitmer winning by 12 or 13, or something like that. And abortion, when asked, then is a big concern to a lot, especially of the Whitmer voters. And I'd be curious about thoughts on this while we're...

And in the breakouts, I was talking with Ron Brownstein about this, who looked down at the cross tabs and so forth. It was penetrating, it was helping Whitmer a lot among working class white women, not just among college educated. I wonder if you think there's some potential for Democrats to ameliorate the damage that's been done to them among white working class in general, but especially women, perhaps if those women may not be so much on board. The Republican in Michigan has a pretty, I think, no exceptions stance on abortion.

BILL GALSTON:

There are some women who are willing to accept a no exceptions stance, but not very many. That's hard turf to defend. Look, I think experience has taught both of us that a single state poll is not something you can put in the bank, but if it's confirmed by others, it will be more than suggestive. And I do think... Let me step back. The conventional wisdom for a long time has been that cultural issues help Republicans. And what we're now seeing is some nuance. On the one hand, we know for sure that issues like defunding the police, abolishing ICE, teaching what is often mislabeled critical race theory in public schools. All of those things cut strongly against Democrats. On the other hand, issues like abortion, and I can now add same sex marriage, if anything, in the current situation are cutting for Democrats.

And I think it's very interesting that on a bipartisan basis, there's now a move in the Senate to codify protections of same sex marriage, in effect codify the Obergefell decision into national law. And I think if the effort is suitably managed, at least 10 Republicans, and maybe more, may sign on to that. So cultural issues now present a more complex landscape than might

have been the case years ago or even months ago. And I think we're going to have to complexify our analyses to take that into account. Now, with regard to what I think your second question was, first of all, I think it's important for everybody to keep in mind how few truly competitive, House seats are left.

And so we used to be talking about a game played between 40 yard lines. Now it'd be more accurate to say that it's a game played between the 45 yard lines. Probably about 10% of House seats are truly competitive and the rest start out leaning very strongly in one direction or another. What we do know about House seats in comparison to Senate seats is the vote tends to be more generic, or if you want to be highfalutin about it, more parliamentary, where party identification means more and variations among candidates mean less. And so I would expect the impact of the Dobbs decision and of the abortion issue to reflect the state of the district rather than what Mitch McConnell has very usefully called candidate quality. And we shall see. This requires a much more fine-grained analysis than we can possibly dive down into in the course of this conversation.

BILL KRISTOL:

Don't you think some... I'm sort of struck that, having looked a little bit at this, some red states and some reddish districts are not quite as socially conservative as everyone assumes. I guess you made this sport about Arizona, which is a purple state. But I don't know, is Texas really on board where there are... Or Texas is a Republican-ish state, but it's gotten closer, and Houston and Dallas and Austin have massive suburbs with people who are probably not on board, the six week ban. And I guess the trigger's beyond six weeks out to zero. So I don't know, I'm just curious. I do think it is state specific, obviously, but...

BILL GALSTON:

Well, it's more than state specific. It's district specific.

BILL KRISTOL:

Right.

BILL GALSTON:

We don't have red states and blue states. We have red demographics and blue demographics, we have red geographics and Blue geographics. And look, I spent 10 years in Austin, Texas, and Austin is a lot more like Seattle than it is like Lubbock. So it's very specific. Let me just ratify your general point, and that is that Kansas is a red state, but it is a red state, I believe, with a democratic governor and it's a red state that indicated very, very forcefully at the ballot box that it was prepared to lean red but not to plunge into a vat of red dye. It said this far but no farther. And if you look at a state like Kansas, the sorts of people that it sends to the Senate, or at least used to send to the Senate, the Doles and the Kassebaums of this world, I think that ethos in Kansas is still there. And so we're going to have to differentiate a little bit more among quote, unquote "red" states. Kansas is not Alabama.

BILL KRISTOL:

And this is a [inaudible] of mine which I'll indulge for 30 seconds. I think you agree with it, though, that people who were... The last 10, 20 years, you would've been right about a lot of elections by saying demography is destiny, as you said, geography is destiny, It's the red districts, blue districts, and it's gotten more polarized. And so people like me who said, well, I don't know, that candidate's terrible, didn't matter. That candidate's good. If you were running for the Senate in South Carolina and you were a fine Democrat or Kentucky, didn't make any difference at all. You got clobbered. There were few exceptions, obviously, Sherrod Brown in Ohio and Joe Manchin, et cetera. But amazingly few actually, at least in... Well, both the Senate and in the House, because it's gotten so polarized, so to speak, and

demographically determined to some degree. But I kind of feel like everyone's over-learned that lesson. It was a true lesson, but everyone's over-learned and then everyone's looking ahead to '22 as sort of like, "Well, Florida, that's just out of the question."

Or Texas. And it's like, I don't know, Florida was a one point race in 2018, three points at the presidential level in 2020. Even Texas was a two point race for Beto, I think in 2018. And at the Presidential level, I don't know, six, seven points maybe, but we're not talking 20 point. You say it's not Mississippi or Alabama. Is it inconceivable these states? People sort of think Ohio... Someone was saying to me just the other day, advanced, at the end of the day it's Ohio, he's going to win. He's like, maybe. On the other hand they do have actual Democratic Senator who actually won a race in 2018. Now it's easier as an incumbent to win. Sherrod Brown is a different candidate than Tim Ryan. There are a million things one could say, but I do feel like the demography has been overdone at this point a little bit. And issues like abortion, a little bit underappreciated. I don't know, do you think that's right?

BILL GALSTON:

Oh look, Bill—

BILL GALSTON:

There's a point at which speculation runs out. As a Democrat, I wish Tim Ryan well. He's running a very smart race, and if he can't win a statewide scene, then I think that will tell us one thing about Ohio. But if he can win, that will say something very different and will put wind in the sails of Democrats who've been arguing for a long time that writing off the white working class is not a path to victory. But speaking of demography, you've given me a chance to sail against the wind one more time.

BILL KRISTOL:

Good, good.

BILL GALSTON:

The conventional wisdom about the... Or the new conventional wisdom about the Hispanic vote is that it's culturally conservative and that the Democrats lean left has antagonized them and helped Republicans make big inroads. There's some truth to that, but on the abortion issue, it is not true. I've taken a look at the cross tabs and a lot of these surveys and Hispanics are even less supportive of what the Supreme Court has done than the country as a whole. And it matters a little bit whether you're looking at Hispanic Catholics as opposed to Hispanic evangelicals. But overall, this is not an issue that's going to work well for Republicans among Hispanics this fall. And if it remains a national issue over the next two years, Republicans may be surprised at the adverse reaction among a group that they're beginning to consider, rightly, eminently gettable, a swing group, more like Italians than African Americans.

BILL KRISTOL:

Interesting. I very much want to come back to the next two years and not just the next two months, but maybe one last question, which is I guess the first question on my list earlier. For the last two months, just has this peaked? If we're having this conversation right after November 8th, I guess we are going to be together at that panel maybe at Harvard on November 10th, a post-election analysis, is this the high-water mark of the effect of Dobbs? Is it likely to be about where it will be for the next two months? Could it even build up more? It's a guess, but what's your sense on that?

BILL GALSTON:

Well, I think a lot depends on how much emphasis candidates and the Democratic party choose to place on the issue. And in areas or districts or even states where candidates are

unusually aggressive in pushing it, I don't expect the level of concern about the issue to subside. But if candidates try to give the issue a big push and they're not getting the return on investment from their advertising or what have you, they expected, they may back off. So I find it hard to generalize, and I don't know whether this counter wave is going to continue to build. Your hunch is as good as mine. One other just footnote to drop to a previous point in the conversation, and that is that the only state that I can see where generic concerns are dominating at the Senate level is the state of Georgia.

If you had asked me two months ago whether Herschel Walker would be nearly tied with Raphael Warnock or not, I would've said no bleeping way. This guy can't string two sentences together and when he tries, amazing things come out of his mouth, like for his never to be forgotten anti-tree diatribe a couple of weeks ago, and he's almost tied with Warnock and could beat him. So if there was ever an issue of McConnell's candidate quality, it's manifest in Georgia and somehow the guy is competitive. Could it be that they're voting for the football player and not the Senate candidate? I don't know, but it is a puzzlement, as Yul Brynner famously said.

BILL KRISTOL:

Well, it's a federal race, so they are voting for Mitch McConnell, not for Chuck Schumer, which is... Presumably, if McConnell and Schumer were running against each other in Georgia, McConnell would win by 10 points. So if they can make it a, "who do you want to run the Senate?" question, "who do you want to check Biden?" question, it's a vote in the right direction, even if it's not—

BILL GALSTON:

I suppose, but if so, you expect that same kind of generic logic to be playing out everywhere and it isn't.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, no, I agree with that. That's why I'm sort of... The tension between the generic, both demographically and who do you want to be speaker or majority leader, versus candidate quality will be an interest thing to watch over the next two months. And I'm not sure which experience the last couple of cycles has been the McConnell/Schumer, if I could put it that way, or certainly helping the Democrats in 2018, the Pelosi versus whoever the Republican leader was going to be, McCarthy I guess, helped. It has mattered. I think it's a big question for this off year election, actually, how much it is, how much it becomes state and district specific. On that note, how much is this part...

Does Dobbs and the Republican reaction to it or some Republicans, including Republican legislative attempts, fit into a broader democratic narrative of Republican extremism? I mean, I think that's important in politics. You've made this point many times, that each of these issues is important, but then if they create an overall image, you focused on the Democrats in this point of touch extremism, even if each issue is sort of explainable away, well they didn't actually say, "Defund the police." Actually this bill, Biden voted for 100,000 cops and whatever. If it fits into some kind of narrative, it has this sort of extra impact. Do you think that's the case here, or have the Democrats done a good job of making it the case, or just maybe they didn't have to do anything, it just is the case?

BILL GALSTON:

I think I can say without fear of contradiction that it's not helping the Republican cause, that the party's reaction to the events of January 6th, I think has gone against the interpretation of events that the majority of Americans endorse. And it is adding to a general impression of a party that is willing to go a step or two too far. And how much of an impact that impression

will have, I can't tell you, but I can tell you this. This is my unified field theory of the dynamic of at least the past two decades. You have one party that is to the left of the American mainstream and another party that's to the right of the mainstream. And especially after each presidential election, there is a tendency, certainly a temptation rarely resisted of the party that temporarily enjoys unified control of government, to go too far down a road that the majority of the people are uncomfortable with.

And certainly, if you look at what Democrats were trying to do in 2021, they were steaming down that road in the wrong direction and they paid a price for it. And usually when you have the party that enjoys the full power of government, parliamentary government temporarily, you end up with a perception that the majority party, the temporarily governing party has moved itself farther outside the mainstream than people are comfortable with, which is one reason that you've had a very strong pattern over the past 20 years or so of reversals of majority control at the first midterm.

But if the minority party that's seeking to become the majority party is steaming as fast as it can in the other direction, then that tends to turn what should be a layup into a jump ball. And I think the Republicans are doing themselves no good, or to put it in more familiar analytical terms, the usual effort by the out party is to turn the first midterm into a referendum on the performance of the in party. But I'm not the first to observe that in the past month or two, the dynamic has shifted from the referendum template to the choice template. And that is not a useful shift for the minority party at this point, particularly if the majority party can, through the use of advertising and focus candidate, emphasize the respects in which the minority party is moving itself outside the mainstream. So, I think that the Republicans, to repeat, are doing themselves no favors.

And I'll say one other thing. As a veteran party watcher, it does not appear to me that the Republican party, if I haven't just committed a metaphysical error by labeling it as a unified entity, that the Republican party did not think very much in advance about what it would say and what it would do if Roe were actually repealed. I mean, in the classic metaphor of the dog that chases the car and finally catches it and doesn't know what to do next, really, I think applies here. And so we were treated to the spectacle of a party uncomfortably shuffling its feet in the days and weeks after the Dobbs decision. And going off in a number of different directions, there was an unaccustomed outbreak of silence. At any rate, it reminds me a little bit of the Republicans trying to deal with repealing and replacing the Affordable Care Act, that they really didn't think through the morning after and therefore, could not figure out what to say .

**BILL KRISTOL:**

I think that's important and I think the pro-life movement didn't really think through, "Okay, well what is our answer on some of these things? Are we going to bless efforts to have more exceptions in a way, as part of the incremental strategy they have been following for quite a while?" Yeah, it is striking. I mean, one footnote to the point before that, I don't know if you'd agree with this, is I think this is slightly second order effect and indirect, but I think Dobbs also made it less obvious that the Democrats were the in party, if I could put it that way, or running the country. Because in fact, Dobbs is not in accord with their wishes, it's of course the opposite and it was done by Trump judges.

And so if you don't like the way... It made it a little harder to simply cast a protest vote, I guess for the Republicans, but somehow you're also casting a vote for the dominant faction on a Supreme Court, which has just handed down this decision, but maybe a couple others also that you're not that happy with. And it somehow it takes the edge off that, "Well, the Democrats have control of everything, so we just can cast a vote protesting against that."

BILL GALSTON:

Well, it's really funny. The Democrats believe that the Republicans are in control of what matters and that they're back on their heels. And the Republicans of course, believe just the reverse. There are elements of truth to both sides. So, what you have now is sort of a symmetrical sense of danger and victimization, which you don't often see in American politics, but it's really playing itself out in the political rhetoric on both sides.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. And while that's probably bad for the country, it's a level of polarization, as a matter of actual off your elections, one reason the out party does better is people are more alarmed than the in party, which is complacently enjoying running the government, sort of. And in this case it's the in party's voters who are alarmed by a government action, albeit, it's Supreme Court.

BILL GALSTON:

But I don't want to underplay the sense of alarm among Republicans.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, no, fair enough.

BILL GALSTON:

Who genuinely believe that they are losing the culture. And that pretty soon, what they believe and what they do will not only be stigmatized, but in some cases outright forbidden by enforceable law. That is a pervasive sense and you see it not just in rank and file, but also in what many conservative theoreticians are now arguing. If you remember Michael Anton's famous *Flight 93* article from 2016, that sentiment is surprisingly widespread. There was a column in *The Washington Post* just this morning, September 8th, quoting J.D. Vance in the most remarkable terms, talking about the late Republican era and implying that unconstitutional steps were going to be needed. We live in trouble times, what else can I say?

BILL KRISTOL:

That's for sure. Let me ask you, I'll let you go in few minutes, but let me ask you about post November. The Democrats, I think they've done a pretty good job in this particular cycle for the last couple of months. Republicans are trying to stay, "Well, Democrats are extreme on their side as implicitly we are on ours," but that hasn't quite taken hold. On this issue in particular, I guess, but maybe more broadly, something you've been so involved in, trying to fight within the Democratic Party for years, for decades. Have the Democrats learned the lesson that you don't want to look like, as you put it, the out of touch party being driven by its more extreme elements? Or will they, if they do decently in this off year, take the opposite, the opposite lesson of, "Hey, we're in great shape. We don't have to not say some certain things, even if we are, in our beating hearts, we want to say to them?" Where do you think the party is right now and maybe likely to be in two months in that broader way?

BILL GALSTON:

Well, in my experience, the Democratic Party is a slow learner, which is not to say entirely obdurate, but the obvious has to be drummed in, and not just by critics like me, but by actual events on the ground. I do think that, for example, there have been some lessons learned on crime and criminal justice. And I think it is now broadly accepted within the party, even among some Democrats who call themselves progressives, that calling for defunding the police was not the smartest thing to say. And of course, the President of the United States never went down that road during his campaign and has explicitly repudiated itself more than once. That has an impact, that has changed and that's that's good. But compare that to immigration, which is a running sore, where the administration, I think because of divisions not only within

the Democratic Party but even in its own ranks, has been unable to come up with a coherent policy and then implement it in a way that makes a difference on the ground.

Some of the recent reports about the numbers of migrants who've come in and weren't even issued notices to appear in court for hearing, talking about hundreds of thousands of people here, that I think is an unlearned lesson that's going to be a real area of vulnerability in the next presidential election unless something is done fast to begin to correct the situation. Because you don't have to be a nativist to think that there is something not right about what's happening at the southern border, that, with the best of intentions, to be generous, the administration has lost control of the situation and isn't very visibly taking steps to regain control anytime soon.

So it's a mixed picture. And of course, advocates deny that they're in favor of open borders, but they oppose any and every measure that might conceivably close or even regulate them. And so I think it's a distinction without a difference. This is a big problem for the Democratic Party. I could go on. To sum up and repeat, if you look at crime, you see the party moving in a reasonable direction, though they're not yet fully where they need to be, in my judgment, but with regard to immigration, they've made no progress at all. It's a major of vulnerability. And I think you could go down the list of contested, quote, unquote, "cultural issues" and divide them into areas of learning and areas of obduracy.

**BILL KRISTOL:**

And can you, as the Democrat, be a little bit— have a position on abortion, to take the particular issue we began with, I mean that is short of no regulations at all for the third trimester, et cetera. I mean, how radical do you think the party's going to look once the focus might be back on them and on presidential candidates as opposed to these individual state races and congressional races?

**BILL GALSTON:**

That is a very interesting question. Tim Ryan, who's running a working class-oriented campaign, appeared on national television I think just last weekend. And he was firm and forthright on a bunch of economic issues. But when it came to abortion, and he was explicitly asked whether there are any limits that he would endorse in his own name, he did a tap dance that Bojangles Robinson would've envied, right? He just would not declare himself on that. And that told me something. All right?

This is Ohio, not California. And this is not Kamala Harris. It's Tim Ryan, and he wouldn't go there. So I'm not sure whether he thought through his answer, was sort of surprised by the question and decided, "Well, I can fix it later, but I don't want to make a dangerous mistake now," or what. But it was very striking. And it tells me that the zone of policy positions that Democrats of various stripes are confident endorsing in their own name may be narrower than is healthy for the party. But that's a very tentative situated judgement. And I may be making too much of the single interview.

**BILL KRISTOL:**

Well, but certainly I think this is a conversation we should have again in the early 2023 because it's going to be so important going forward. I think people forget. I don't want to speak for you, but I certainly personally hope that on the whole, the Democrats do well. Not on a whole, but even in almost every case, that the Democrats do well in November '22, because I don't like the idea of a Republican Senate or a Republican House, if those could be avoided just for the future, for governance, and like I said, it's a Trumpy party.

But I think you would agree with this. You and Elaine, I think put out "The Politics of Evasion" in 1989, and you had a big impact, and the whole Clinton New Democratic effort there, which succeeded in '92. But the biggest impact was the fact that Democrats thought they had a very good chance in 1988. Everyone sort of has forgotten this in history because we now think of, from a policy point of view, the Reagan-Bush years, 12 years. Makes perfect sense. They wanted to go to war, why not? But Bush was an underdog, or thought to be at least, in '88. Dukakis was thought to be a reasonable candidate, actually, a moderate governor. And I think the shock of losing that election, don't you think, really helped?

BILL GALSTON:

This is a line I have taken in public and in private many times, that I was... For my sins, I was Walter Mondale's issues director for two and a half years during his presidential campaign. And I don't think there was anybody in America who was surprised by the outcome of that race. But I'll tell a self-centered story about 1988.

BILL KRISTOL:

Good.

BILL GALSTON:

It was June of 1988. If memory serves, Dukakis was up on George H.W. Bush by about 17 points in June. Then out of the blue, and I'd been talking about my skepticism privately with Democrats, so out of the blue I get a call from the late sainted David Broder. He let off, as with his usual Midwestern bluntness, "Hey, Galston, I hear you're the only Democrat in town who doesn't think this is in the bag for Dukakis." And I said, "You heard, right?" He said, "Would you tell me why on the record?" And I did. And I was not a bit surprised when H.W. won the election going away, but for the Democratic party, as a whole, it was a third shock.

This sort of plays into my law of threes, that for parties who are entrenched in a bad position, it usually takes three national election losses to convince them that something has gone seriously wrong. That was true for the Democrats. It was true for the Labor Party in the UK. They needed to lose three consecutive elections. Then it was true from the Tories who needed to lose three consecutive elections.

So I do think... and back up. This is what the lawyers call an argument against interest. I know that some months ago, a bunch of Democrats, who feared the worst about the outcome of the midterm elections, were planning to use the then-expected red wave as the proof point in an argument that the party needed to reorganize and reorient itself for 2024. A lot of the steam is going to go out of that movement if Democrats hold the Senate or make gains, which of course is now no longer a minority view, it's pretty close to the majority view, and hold their losses in the House to either single digits or somewhere in the mid-teens. That would not be seen as a sweeping victory for Kevin McCarthy and company.

So what is the discussion inside the party at that point? I think a lot of the steam may go out of the regroup and redirect the party's energies in '23 and '24. That said, I do subscribe to the conventional view that if the Republicans take back the House, it's going to be all investigations and all scandals all the time. And how that's going to play with the American people, I can't tell you, but this is not going to be prime time for bold, far-reaching legislation.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, the Republicans could do a good job of making it easier for the Democrats to avoid confronting some of the issues you discussed in "The Politics of Evasion" for quite a while and maybe for the next five years for all we know. But maybe that's not good for the country even.

It might be okay for the Democratic party, but I also think we need to have this discussion. We'll have to have another conversation in early '23, because this really is an important point.

BILL GALSTON:

You won't get an argument out of me, but I suspect the political class will spend somewhere between 10 and a 100 times as much time talking about the contents of Hunter Biden's laptop as they will the future of the Democratic Party, though I think I know which is more important.

BILL KRISTOL:

Still, there'll be maybe a new nominee in '24, maybe not, but either way, a real discussion, at least internally, which you'll be part of, so we should have that outcome. We should have a public discussion here on Conversations about that internal discussion in early '23, but for now, I think we've... Unless there are last thoughts we haven't covered on this sort of politics of abortion in 2022, I think we've given people, I hope, a good guidance on how to think about it at least. And obviously we don't quite know how... We don't know at all how it will play out, but it's such an interesting... I think it's an interesting and somewhat unexpected phenomenon and has implications beyond itself, perhaps, so beyond just the last few two months, in the next two months.

BILL GALSTON:

It does. I'll just put one on the table in closing.

BILL KRISTOL:

Good.

BILL GALSTON:

And by the way, I'll just tell you what you already know. I'm a really cheap date Bill, so—

BILL KRISTOL:

Okay, good.

BILL GALSTON:

Ask anytime. And ask—

BILL KRISTOL:

Well, we're a very cheap employer or whatever. We're not even an employer. We're a very cheap supplicant, so we'll fit together well, if we have [inaudible].

BILL GALSTON:

I think what we've seen over the past 50 years is both parties moving away from a slowly formed consensus among the American people as to where the center of gravity on the issue is. Right now, neither political party, in its official utterances, is within haling distance of that. Which one gets there first?

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. With Bill Clinton, "safe, legal, and rare" turned out to be about where the country was, right?

BILL GALSTON:

Yeah. Now how do you cash that out in more concrete policy terms—

BILL KRISTOL:

Now, that's a big challenge.

BILL GALSTON:

But it's a big challenge, but look, I think Republicans are clearly in the wrong political position on first trimester abortions. Democrats are clearly in the wrong political position on third trimester abortions. And that zone in the middle is where the consensus could be found if either political party wanted to find it.

BILL KRISTOL:

That's a good note to... question, I guess, to end on. So, Bill Galston, thank you for joining me today.

BILL GALSTON:

My pleasure.

BILL KRISTOL:

Interesting conversation, I think, I hope, and useful. And thank you all for joining us in *Conversations*.