

Red Wave Rising?

The Prospects for Republican Success in the 2022 Elections

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The title was meant to be provocative with the question mark: Red Wave Rising? Will it, or will it not happen? Since Jack and I devised this topic a few weeks ago, President Biden's already-low popularity ratings have sunk even further. So depending on where you might give this talk, you might say red wave rising, period. Or, if it's a conservative campus, red wave rising, say that ten times fast, exclamation point.

But I'll be talking about a few points in more detail. First of all, as we look forward to nine months from now when election day occurs, it is exceedingly likely that Republicans will take control of both chambers, at least as it appears now. It is increasingly likely that they will have significant majorities in both chambers. And there is increasingly also a non-trivial chance that it will be a generic wave election that will sweep out people previously thought to be safe and give Republicans majorities that could theoretically be larger than they've had since the Great Depression after the election of 1930. That's point number one.

Point number two is that this is directly tied to the perceptions of President Biden and his performance in the White House. As I'll show in my talk, the performance of Democrats in the November [2021] election in Virginia and New Jersey had little to do with those candidates and those states and had everything to do with the perception of President Biden and the Democrats' control of things in Washington. In other words, the trend that we've had over the last decade or more of increasingly partisan and increasingly nationalized elections hit perhaps an even greater apex in the November elections, and I'm going to give you a sneak peak of what my column tomorrow will be going into to describe that.

So then for the third point, I'm going to pose a question and then give a brief answer. What can the Democrats do about this? And what I'll say is, one, the best thing that can happen to them has little to do with their behavior. Which is to say that if there are no new [COVID] variants during the summer, people may get more comfortable coming back to work, and somehow inflation will fade back into the three percent realm. These are all things that could help them dramatically. But, aside from events smiling on the President, I think there is precious little that Democrats can do about it. The reason why has less to do with the advice that many people on the left are giving Biden almost daily. That advice has been stop

turning left and start turning center. But the biggest reason why President Biden can't do that is the internal dynamics of the Democratic party. And I'll try and explain in some detail that while that is a theoretical option, it is almost certainly not a real option given the political dynamics that he faces, which are simply different from the political dynamics that any president of the Democratic party has faced in the last century.

Let's first start with the proposition of the odds. We know as political scientists and political analysts that the party that holds the White House almost always loses seats in the first midterm. In fact, it also almost always loses seats in the second midterm if the person is reelected, but it will almost always lose seats in the first midterms. This is in part due to buyer's remorse, and in part it's because the opposition is more energized to turn out in elections. But the fact is, since the Great Depression, there have only been three midterm elections where the president's party has gained seats in the House and I think there's only four or five where president's party lost fewer than the number of seats that Republicans need to gain to have a one seat majority in The House of Representatives.

So going into the midterms, history suggests that the Democrats will lose control of at least the House. The Senate looks to be more of a toss-up. That's of course because the Senate does not have all one hundred seats up. What Senate seats are up determines whether or not a party can gain seats. There are many instances of a presidential party losing seats in the House but gaining seats in the senate. The most recent of those was 2018, when Republicans were annihilated in the House, losing forty seats, but they gained seats in the Senate because the seats that were up were disproportionately held by Democrats from Republican-leaning or strongly Republican states.

Going into this year, it looked like it was going to be a relatively even match up. There were the close states of Pennsylvania, North Carolina, and Wisconsin, with retiring Republican incumbents in Pennsylvania and North Carolina, and a person running for a third term, Ron Johnson in Wisconsin, who is violating his two-term pledge to run for a third term. Each of these states was among the closest in the last presidential election. North Carolina was carried by roughly a point and a few tenths for Trump, and both Wisconsin and Pennsylvania were carried by less than a percentage point by President Biden. These three Republican-held seats were considered to be, and many people still consider them to be, toss ups.

On the Democratic side, you had Democrats representing two other of the closest five states, Arizona and Georgia. That's Raphael Warnock in Georgia and Mark Kelly in Arizona. And then you have Catherine Cortez Masto representing Nevada, which was won by Biden by about three to four points and leans Democrat, but not strongly so. So it looks to be a roughly even match in the Senate.

Let's rewind a year. When President Biden took office, he took office not only after winning a majority of the presidential popular vote – he got about 51.5% – but he took office with even higher approval ratings, in part because presidents not named Donald Trump tend to have a bit of a bump up immediately after the inauguration in approval ratings. And the acts of January 6 I think helped drive

some of that. Biden took office in a pretty historically good place. Not as good as presidents in the pre-partisan era like Eisenhower or Kennedy or even Nixon, but certainly in the modern era, starting in the 1950s.

What happened, however, was that around mid-2021 that approval rating went down. Some of that is to be expected: presidential approval ratings rarely maintain their immediate post-inauguration highs. It's simply because people begin to tire and they begin to point out more of what a person is doing wrong than what they're doing right.

But around the summertime you started to see a very worrying trend if you're a Democrat, which is that even though Republicans continued to be ineffectual in Washington, you started to see the president's job approval rating among Independents starting to slip, even before the withdrawal from Afghanistan.

The President started to slip among independent voters in May or June or early July. Even among the independent voters he won his Presidential majority because of character by nearly 10 percentage points. Yet even before the disaster in Kabul, he was running behind among Independents, more disliked him than liked him, and that has since become a runaway avalanche. Depending on the poll that you look at, the President is underwater, as we say, which would say more people disfavor in him than favor him among independents by between twenty-five and thirty-six points.

President Biden has favorability ratings among Independents that equal or exceed the net negative ratings of President Trump at the same time. The only reason Joe Biden's overall job approval ratings remain higher than President Trump's is because there are more people who identify as Democrats than Republicans. If the flip side were true, that there were more who identified as Republicans than Democrats, President Biden's job approval ratings at this moment would be equal to or lower than Donald Trump's ratings were in January 2017.

This is a terrible place to be. It is an almost historically low place for somebody who is not under threat of indictment or somebody who is not presiding over a defeat in war or economic collapse. Very few Presidents get below 37 to 40% job approval rating absent those factors. The President is now flirting with that, and this is something that the Democrats are rightfully terrified about.

I am now going to give you the preview of what I'm going to be writing in my column. We know the Republicans did very well in the state elections in Virginia and New Jersey in November. Republicans won the Governor of Virginia for the first time since 2009 and a Republican came within 3.4% of winning New Jersey. It's important to realize that these are states that Biden carried overwhelmingly. Biden carried Virginia by over 10 points, and Biden carried New Jersey by nearly sixteen points. In fact, if you subtract the margins of either defeat for the Republican or victory for the Democrat in New Jersey from Biden's victory margin in that state you come up with nearly identical numbers. The shift between a Biden victory and a Republican victory in the fall in Virginia was about a 12.1% and the margin between

the Biden victory and Democratic Governor Murphy's victory in New Jersey was about twenty-six percent.

Now let's take a look at another statistic. On the day of the election, if you look at the Real Clear Politics average of polls, you will see that Joe Biden was underwater, and this is to say people more people disliked him than liked him, by eight percent. He carried the nation by four and a half percent. That is a 12.5%-point shift. In other words, the national shift was nearly identical to the state shift in each of these states.

But wait, it gets better.

If you look at the state legislative seats in the House of Delegates in Virginia, the lower house, and the State Assembly in New Jersey, there is no seat that was carried by less than twelve and a half points by Democrats. Every single seat that the Republicans could have picked up below that mark, they won. In fact, in Virginia, we won one seat with an even higher total, over 15 percentage points.

That could be coincidence or could be the canary in a coal mine that the hyper-nationalization and hyper-partisanship that we have been seeing increasingly, came to roost in a consistent way. What would that mean for Joe Biden if this were not a coincidence? What will that mean on election day 2022 if Joe Biden is still eight points underwater?

It would mean a loss of between thirty-five and forty-five seats in the House. That would give Republicans more members of the House than they've had at any time since 1930. And it would mean a loss of four seats in the Senate. It would mean those two seats that I spoke about. It would mean that they would not lose any of the Republican toss up seats, Democrats would lose Nevada, and they lose Maggie Hassan's seat in New Hampshire, which Biden carried by only seven points.

In other words, if what we saw in November 2021 is an indication of extreme partisanship carried to extreme degrees, the Democrats could be getting wiped out if that continues. Now, how does it get even worse? Biden now, as of today, is six points worse off than he was on election day. He is today on the same average fourteen points upside down. There is now an eighteen-and-a-half-point shift, as opposed to a twelve-and-a-half-point shift.

He may get better than this. That's what we'll talk about. He may get worse than this, but if what we're seeing in November of 2021 carries through and he remains this low we're talking about sixty seats in the House. We're talking about more seats for the Republicans since 1922. We're talking six or seven seats in the Senate, which would put them in the highest position since 1924. In other words, we're talking about historic-level landslides. Of course, there's a lot of conjecture, and I don't want to predict that's going to happen. I simply want to raise the point that there is evidence to suggest it might happen and that to dismiss the evidence out of hand is not terribly scientific.

Now of course, in any election there's always going to be somebody who runs as the outlier. Susan Collins last year carried Maine by seven percent even when Biden was winning by nine percent.

She was, however, the only Senator to carry a state that was not of the same party as the presidential nominee. Only one of the thirty-five seats that were up for election went to a different party. In 2018 that number was two: Joe Manchin of West Virginia, and Jon Tester of Montana. In 2016, for the first time since the direct election of Senators, there were zero Senators who separated from the party. Every single Senate election went the same way as the presidential election.

There will be outliers. There may not be many of them if this continues, and what 2021 suggests is that, if anything, it will get less likely that there'll be an outlier and more likely that there will be extreme partisanship.

So now, the question is: okay, I'm a Democrat. I'm David Shore, the Democratic analyst. I looked at these numbers and I quietly came to the same conclusion as this Washington Post columnist: what am I going to tell Democrats to do?

What can they do? Well, as I mentioned, the first thing that I can do is hope that events get better. One thing that they can do is make fighting inflation an absolute number one priority. Yesterday the President, who surely knows this, was asked a question by a Fox News reporter, to which he responded, forgetting that his mic was on, with an expletive, which he is now called to apologize for. But he knows, having lived through the 1970s, that high inflation is a political killer. One thing he may not know unless he's a political historian is the story of the election of 1946.

After World War Two, a period when the economy was suppressed because of war, people were paid money that they could not spend because of a shortage of consumer goods and rationing of the goods that existed. What happened was when the war was over, people went on a spending spree and inflation skyrocketed. And what that meant was a Republican victory for the first time since the 1928 elections. They took over the House with large numbers; they took over the Senate with large numbers. Even in a time when people thought that Republicans were the enemy of the working class, when inflation broke ten percent, they punished the party that they believed had saved them from fascism and from depression.

What happened then was that inflation dropped very quickly, because it was a bubble inflation. It was not being supported by monetary expansion. It was not being supported by constant fiscal expansion. It was simply a case of people spending one time savings: when it was gone, it was gone. Inflation went back down and the Republicans lost control in the famous election of 1948. They thought they were going to win the White House by running a no contest campaign and instead, it was Dewey v. Truman. Truman won and the Democrats took control of both chambers of Congress, and the Democrats would then hold either the House or the Senate for virtually the entirety of the next thirty-two years. Inflation and Dwight Eisenhower in 1952 were the only things to break fifteen years of continued Democratic control in Washington until the advent of Ronald Reagan.

So, what can Biden do? Well, this could be unlike 1946 because of the multiple rounds of fiscal expansion. Particularly, sending thousands of dollars of stimulus checks to people who didn't lose their

jobs means that the money supply expanded at the greatest pace in history during the COVID shutdown. On the one hand, millions of people lost their jobs, but on the other hand there are, as of the beginning of this year, two and a half trillion dollars more in savings and checking accounts in American household bank accounts than there were in the average of the previous thirty years.

People paid down their debt, they banked the rest of the money, and now they're spending. They can't spend it fast enough for this to go away very quickly. We threw so much money at the problem, but for many people that wasn't the problem. Many people basically banked the money, which was the same situation as 1946. But unlike 1946, what we also have is a fiscal expansion by the Federal Reserve to support the economy. They bought hundreds of billions of dollars of government bonds, putting that money into the economy, and you also had the COVID relief bill, passed in March, that put another \$1.9 trillion into the economy.

All of that means that there was a fiscal and monetary stimulus that adds to the potential of the bubble inflation that was not present in 1946. The Democratic advisors, the Biden advisors, will say none of this is true, that all of the inflation is because of supply chain disruptions and all of this is going to go away as soon as people come back to work and we get out of COVID.

A lot depends on the truth of that. If they're right and I'm wrong, then, by the end of the year, we should probably go back to the ordinary supply chain, and people will be working again and we'll come back. And if they're not right, inflation will be pushing close to double digits and there's going to be a wide gap in employment. You're going to have to make very hard decisions about whether to support a significant Federal Reserve tightening of the money supply – whether they're going to put on the brakes, as Senator Manchin has urged them to do – or continue fiscal stimulus of an economy that even some Democratic economists, such as former Treasury Secretary Larry Summers, say is already massively overheating. If they guess right, they get the benefits. If they get wrong, they get the political penalty, and it will be a real doozy.

So, the other thing that they can do would be to begin to track towards the center on some of the cultural issues that increasingly bother moderates. I'm not talking about culture war issues that animate people on Fox News, I'm talking about things like masking children under the age of ten or talking about our nation's founding in a way that is more positive than negative, even while acknowledging that, like any country, our history is not perfect.

Then the third thing I'd say is that, while it probably hasn't touched you, the fact is our murder rate on a rate of 100,000 people reached a 20-to-25-year high last year. We are now seeing as many people killed per capita as we saw at a time when crime was dominating political discussion. That's something that people don't like. For some reason, people don't like property crime, physical crime, and the risk of being shot by people that they don't know, or even people that they do know. This is a global issue, but it also demands some sort of national response.

If the Biden administration wants to show people who are Independents that he cares about their priorities, he needs to act and prioritize their priorities, which means fighting inflation, fighting crime, and talking about an inclusive America, rather than one that divides.

Now this is not what the Democratic activist base wants. There was a poll recently that asked “What is your most important issue?” It was a YouGov/Economist poll, and for liberals the number one issue was climate change. It was nowhere near the top of the issues for self-described moderates. The number three issue among activists was civil rights; only five percent of moderates agree. In other words, the things that are amping people in Washington among the Democrats, fighting climate change and passing a voting rights bill, are completely uninteresting to the people who are the swing voters in America. That's not what they want to address, so the first thing you should do if you want to persuade people is take their concern seriously. And then they need to act seriously, but to do that means having a dispute with the progressive base of the party. That gets to my third point: why it is going to be so difficult for Biden to do this, and why he faces a political situation that none of his predecessors has ever faced.

The Democratic party has been the left of center party in the two-party system. Although anyone who knows European parties knows to be left of center in America means to be right of center historically in other places, but that's been the case since Franklin Roosevelt pulled them in that direction, in the election of 1932.

There has always been an element within that coalition that has been European-style leftist, whether it is the Social Democratic left or further, but hitherto, they have been a minority, a small part politically, although a larger part of the intellectual class in the 1940s. They split off from Harry Truman in 1948 saying that he wasn't sufficiently left wing. Their candidate, Henry Wallace, got under three percent of the vote. Challenges from the Left have repeatedly been a feature of Democratic politics since that time. We saw progressive activists taking out machine politicians in the cities in the 1960s, and you saw the George McGovern candidacy in 1972. This was not something that happened for the first time with Bernie Sanders, but before there was a massive supermajority of Democrats who are either moderate or conservative. These left of center activists and voting base could win some primaries in some safe areas, but they could not dominate a statewide primary and certainly could not consistently dominate a national primary.

Let's fast forward to today. That is no longer the case. Increasingly over the last few years, the number of people who will describe themselves in the Democratic Party as liberal or very liberal has grown. They are now the largest percentage of Democrats in recorded history, whereas as recently as 2004, a majority of Democratic voters in the presidential primary called themselves moderate or conservative. In the 2020 primaries a decided majority were liberal or very liberal. You're increasingly seeing people from the extreme left, people who, like Alexandria Ocasio Cortez or others who are open

members of the Democratic Socialists of America, winning primaries against entrenched liberal but not as liberal Democratic incumbents. And energetic partisans who will spend their time volunteering or who will give to candidate after candidate on Act Blue over and over and over again, also tend to be of the progressive variety.

To shift to the center, as Bill Clinton famously did after he lost the 1994 midterms, was relatively easy because that was a time when the majority of Democrats were tilted center to center right. Today that is no longer the case. To move to the center to address the concerns of the center means to say no to one-third to 40% of your party, and a larger percentage of large donors, activists and staffers.

Democrats have mentioned this. The analyst that I mentioned has talked about this. Ruy Teixeira, a Democratic election analyst with the Center for American Progress, has talked about this. These aren't, as they like to say, Republican talking points. I'm just repeating points that Democratic progressives have made, saying that maybe we need to have, if not that fight, at least find a way to push progressive issues that are also popular with the Democratic center.

The problem is that in politics you don't have unlimited bandwidth. If you're going to talk about childcare, you may not be able to talk about climate, or if you're going to talk about crime, you may not be able to talk about voting rights, and not talking about it is precisely what the progressives do not want. They will compromise on some details, but what they will not do is put aside the things they think are the most important things in America.

That complicates Biden's tactic. No Democratic president has had that internal battle. Biden's signature political power is finding where the center of the Democratic Party is at any time and running to occupy it. This guy was anti-busing and pro-life in Delaware when it was a center-right state and could elect Republicans in the 1970s, and he has moved about wherever the center of the Democratic Party is.

The thing is the center of the Democratic Party now is significantly to the left of where the center of the country is. And I'm not saying Republicans don't have a similar problem, but when you're in the White House and you hold the House and you hold the Senate, the opposition does not feature much in voters' minds. Midterms are, to use a sports analogy, like a tennis match where the party that holds those two congressional chambers and the executive branch are like the person who is serving and all the opposition party has to do is break the serve.

That's why Mitch McConnell won't put up an alternative. That's why Kevin McCarthy won't put up an alternative. Joe Biden, in a press conference last week, said "What are the Republicans for?" He wants to make it a choice. Midterms are never a choice. Midterms are always referendums.

He will try to bait them, he will try to provoke them into providing that alternative. They will almost certainly not do so and if they do, they will do so in such a way that will not give him anything serious to hang his hat on. Does Joe Biden, a 78–79-year-old man, have enough to change fifty years of political habit? Does he have it in him to say no, here I stand, I can do no other? Most presidents do.

Biden has not won his presidency in that vein, and that is why I do not think he can do what is needed to keep oxygen, which means he's dependent upon events.

He can also depend on crazy Republicans. In 2010, when Republicans gained over sixty seats in the House and gained six seats in the Senate, they would have gained more seats in the Senate except they nominated crazy people. People were elected who were so obviously unqualified for office, like Christine O'Donnell, who defeated a moderate Republican in the primary. He would've won the seat, would have been the last Republican elected from Delaware, and was strong enough that the Democrats were conceding the seat to him. O'Donnell beat him because she's a true-blue conservative. She is so crazy she actually had said on a TV show years before that she dabbled in witchcraft, so during the campaign she had to run a TV ad to average voters saying "I am not a witch." I'd rather have Sabrina say, "I am a witch, and I went to Salem high school."

That kind of candidate cost the party three senate seats. They would have gained nine, but for the crazy candidates – and Republicans do have the crazy – they almost certainly will blow something somewhere this year. But as in 2010 that will be the exception, it won't be the rule.

What I'd like to leave you with as we go into questions is: First, between the events of history and the problematic decisions of the Biden administration, this is shaping up to be an excellent year for Republicans, and perhaps a historic year for Republicans. Second, the issues that face the Biden administration are difficult, but he is also faced by the most difficult political challenge that anyone in his party has ever faced, and that means that he will need to have a particularly high degree of political skill in order to reverse the decline. Third, if the Republicans' fantasies come true, if Biden, who is now minus fourteen in the polls, stays at minus fourteen in the polls, we're looking at more Republican power than at any time since before the Great Depression.

Then the question is on them, because the only way you change the country is by winning consecutive elections, three or four in a row with large majorities. The Democrats won the 1930 elections with large gains. They swept to power in 1932, with a supermajority in the House and a twenty-point win in the presidency. They defied history and gained seats in the 1934 midterms. Franklin Roosevelt won another massive landslide in 1936 and the Democrats gained seats again for the fourth election in a row, putting the Republicans down to eighty-eight seats and the 435 member House and seventeen seats in the Senate after 1936. That is why the country shifted to the left: four consecutive super majority wins.

The Republicans have a history of winning midterms and blowing presidential elections. We'll see if their fantasies come true, whether they can finally rid themselves of their nightmares in 2024.

I'll take your questions.

QUESTION:

What would be the word, I don't want to use far right per se, to describe what, I definitely see as a large portion of the Republican Party. But what would the word be for the more radicalized base of the Republicans, maybe, like the January sixth supporters? I know I don't want you to use the word Trumper now that people boo Trump for things, and you know he's created a monster really at this point, before I ask the second question, what would be the best word to call people like them? The lady and the candidates that are in like Georgia—

OLSEN:

Marjorie Taylor Greene.

QUESTION:

Yeah, people like her and supporters of people like her, what would they be called?

OLSEN:

That's hard to come up with a single word. These are people who are angry, they are uncompromising, and they are extreme both in their rhetoric and in their positions. I don't have a single word that will come up with it, but I think those three words conjure up a rather consistent image that I think represents not the majority, but a nontrivial part of the Republican party.

QUESTION:

So for the second question, then, out of all the seats that are up to be won and those to be elected, and the voter base, like the Independents, do we see that the Independents are voting for those extreme Republicans or does the Independent base that decides the election look at people like Marjorie Taylor Greene and say “there's absolutely no way we're voting for her, and we can't put such people in office?”

OLSEN:

I think what we saw in November was none of those charges stuck. I think none of those charges stuck, because none of those candidates were of that variety. So, I don't think the indirect attribution will work. When you see somebody who, by their works and by their deeds, actually is that person, I think you will see the Independents swayed. That's what I was trying to say with 2010, which was a year when many people whom you might consider to be extreme won seats, but if the person was as angry, conspiratorial, extremely uncompromising as Sharon Angle in Nevada, running against a very unpopular senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, she ended up losing by about six or eight points because even people who didn't like Harry Reid said I cannot put that person in the Senate.

So, it can happen, but it's not going to happen by attribution. That's one of the things that Democrats don't want to believe. Which is, they want to believe that they can make Trump and that wing, the face of the Republican party but what we saw in 2021 is their attempts to do so failed. What polling data shows is that most people don't believe that indirect attribution.

So, Democrats are continually saying our democracy is at risk and that restricting the ability to cast absentee ballots, which is a basic summary of the Georgia law, is a case of denying people the right

to vote. That's laughable to most Independents. It's not to progressives, but it is to most Independents, and I think the Democrats are making an effort to view Independents as toddlers and force them to eat their progressive peas. I think that would fall flat and the polling data suggests that that's exactly what's happening.

But to your narrow question, yes, there will be people who will win who fit that description and they will either do worse than similarly situated but non-angry/extreme/uncompromising Republicans or they will lose.

QUESTION:

So, regarding events you mentioned could swing the election in one direction or the other, anything suggest that events in the Ukraine could have any impact in the election?

OLSEN:

You never want to say something can't have an impact, but voters don't prioritize foreign policy, unless they feel directly impacted. And, so far, while they may be concerned about something in Ukraine, they don't feel directly impacted by it. On the other hand, one of the elections where Democrats, the party in power, did not lose more than five House seats was the 1962 midterms when the Cuban missile crisis was played out on TV screens for the three weeks before the midterm. Of course, that was a case where Americans did feel directly affected because the nuclear missiles were 90 miles away, but it was also a case of extreme presidential leadership.

I don't want to say it won't, and I don't want to say it can't. I also don't want to say that a successful resolution would be a game changer because American history suggests it is unlikely, but I don't think it would be a bad day for the President if he were able to show leadership that prevented an invasion of Ukraine.

QUESTION:

I also want to ask, I think we see a lot of overly patriotic representatives, the one I can think of the most readily is Lauren Boebert, representatives like that. Do you consider a disconnect in pushing that we should go to conflict and try to protect like Ukraine and stop the spread of the USSR, again, or do you think...? I'm just curious what you think would happen with that.

OLSEN:

I don't think there's any appetite for a war with Russia or certainly not an appetite for war with Russia over Ukraine. I think people like Boebert are basically acting demagogically. They're trying to say, "Oh look, you're failing for not having any plausible answer for what we do differently." I think Putin is aware of that. What he will want to do is get the maximum tangible promises from the West and from Biden in order to prevent what they don't want, which is some sort of defeat or shooting war or war between Russians and Americans. So, the question is going to be, how does Biden advocate that and how do Americans perceive that?

I think we can't answer that question because that's too many unknowns. Now, ideally, what Biden wants to do is come out of this looking strong or not giving away the store and preventing a physical invasion of Ukraine. If he can hit that then that's probably the best to do.

QUESTION:

So, I know, like, especially the most recent presidential election, like the red state Texas has a more of a growing blue trend, so do you think with the midterm elections that it's going to stall or like even go backwards into like truer red?

OLSEN:

Texas has been moving towards the Democrats in recent years because of two factors. One is a change in voting patterns among educated suburbanites, because some of the areas that moved most from voting for Romney to voting for Democrats were in suburban Dallas and suburban Houston. And the other is the growth of the non-white population, particularly Latinos. I think in the midterms what you will see is a movement of some of those suburbanites back to the Republican Party. Even if they may not want to be Republicans, they don't want to endorse this Democratic agenda and what the data suggests is a massive movement, particularly in Texas, but also nationwide, among Hispanics away from the Democratic Party that you already saw in 2020.

Hispanics nationally moved towards Trump and towards Republicans in 2020. It was most pronounced in Cuban precincts in Miami and Latino Mexican areas that border the Rio Grande. Every poll that has come out has basically said that those trends are accelerating and are particularly accelerating in the Rio Grande Valley in Texas as Mexican working class, and Mexican Americans descended from Mexican working class are increasingly unfavorable towards Joe Biden. So, I think for 2022, blue Texas, which became like purple Texas in 2018, is going to move back to being light to medium red.

The long-term question for the Republicans is this. The Republicans cannot become a majority party on a consistent basis without getting 40 to 45% of the Hispanic vote nationwide. If they fail to do this, they will continue to be locked in a demographic downward spiral. So, if the Republicans do not take advantage of what appears to be a two to three years surge in Republican support and things go back to the way they were in 2016 among Hispanic voters, that blue Texas could very well be a reality by the end of the decade. It will take that long for all the trends to play out.

QUESTION

Okay, so you mentioned that climate change and civil rights are not that interesting to Independents, but climate change is something that is affecting the whole world, as are civil rights and voting rights in general, so, would you say that, like, climate change and civil rights issues are not as important as issues of crime? I feel like we can't just not address them; they have to be addressed at least.

OLSEN

I'm going to guess that you identify as a Democrat. You don't have to answer that, I should say that that is an argument I hear often from Democrats, I shouldn't phrase it that way.

But that is what makes Joe Biden's position difficult. On the one hand he represents the Democratic Party that will not accept inaction on those issues. On the other hand, they are utterly not persuasive to the independent voters at this time. They are simply not priorities. If Joe Biden does not pass a climate change bill, and there is no progress on voting rights, Independents in this country in the midterm election in 2022 will not care one bit.

I may be wrong. I'm not going to pass judgment on people's issue preferences and beliefs, it may be short sighted. But that is simply where the data are pointing to is that they are, they want other things addressed. If those other things are addressed, they might be perfectly happy with moving on those things as well, but if the price of moving on all those things means the things that they prioritize are not being taken care of to their satisfaction they will not care. It is not motivational for them

QUESTION:

I had a second question. Besides crime, what other issues do Independents value?

OLSEN:

Inflation right now. It's often put as jobs or the economy, but it really is inflation. What they're seeing is prices going up, for everything, continually. I think it is also not helping the Biden administration that at least three times in 2020 they told Americans that this was temporary, and it is not only not temporary, but it's gotten worse each time. So, while most people aren't political analysts, they don't remember all of that, but the ones that do are Republicans who will remind them of that in ads. If inflation is still a problem in October, I expect to see a lot of ads of Joe Biden dismissing inflation as a problem in April, June, and September.

Inflation is the number one, but crime is also important from a Republican perspective. What's interesting is the Republican topic that replaces climate change is the border, which is to say that Republicans place immigration and what's happening with the southern border as a high priority. It's a motivational issue for them, it's not a motivational issue for Independents. So when Republicans want to talk about the border, unless that changes, they are prioritizing something that Independents do not prioritize.

But Independents are prioritizing getting back to traditional political issues. Am I safe? Are my children getting a good education? Am I able to afford the style of life that I want to live? Can I get a job? That's what Independents are prioritizing.

QUESTION

I had a question about turnout. When you talk about the percentage of New Jersey that Biden won by, the percentage that the Democrat lost by the next election, the turnouts were both different. How does that affect the issue?

OLSEN:

That is an interesting question.

I have not looked at New Jersey. There are people who look at Virginia and say that Republicans were more motivated to go vote. First of all, from what has been going on the last few days shows a massive enthusiasm gap between Republicans and Democrats. Most of that is pretty normal. In the sense of, all the partisans in both parties always turn out.

So, you should be precise about what you're talking about and most political pundits on television are not. What you're talking about is not turning out the hardcore progressive or hardcore right-wing activists. What you're talking about is turning out less frequent voters who share those predilections. Midterms typically have higher, not huge, but higher turnout among that sort of person from the out party rather than the in party. And you also tend to see the enthusiasm gap shrink the closer you get to the election.

Yes, Democrats may not be enthusiastic now, but trust me by October most people will be. As many or more of those people from Republicans to Independents will turn out.

There is evidence that suggests that Glenn Youngkin won the Latino vote in Virginia and other evidence that suggests that about 40%. Either one will be a massive improvement. That's not Republican turnout, that's persuasion. That's an independent switching issue. Loudoun county is the most Asian county in Virginia and Glenn Youngkin lost it, but he gained a significant amount of ground there. There's not enough Republicans out there to create that sort of differential. What he did was persuade a lot of Asian voters who voted for Ralph Northam, who voted for Hillary Clinton, and voted for Joe Biden to vote for him. So, yes turnout matters but it almost never matters as much as the partisans argue it does.

And each of these wave elections, you watch and see if you see a turnout differential in favor of the party leading the way, but you'll also see self-described Independents who will be back. That was my article on Monday, talking about how the Independents have just been swinging like a metronome for the last fifteen years. Seventeen points for Democrats in 2006, nineteen points for Republicans in 2010. That, much more than any turnout differential, is why I focus on Joe Biden's approval rating among Independents. You can get 80% approval rating for a Democrat, but that is not enough to win these areas that are up for grabs. You have to not lose Independents by 30%. They have to not hate you and that's a different problem.

QUESTION

I'm wondering about the Supreme Court. There are some hot button issues coming up in the Supreme Court this year. If the Supreme Court moves in a conservative direction as it widely expected to, could that have an impact on independent voters that would change the expectations for the midterm?

OLSEN

It could. Basically, abortion politics as it's played out in America, for the last thirty or forty years is that there are committed people on both sides. They tend to be activists, donors as close to those, but there are pro-choice believers and there are pro-life believers on that map. There are many, many more people who own those positions who don't prioritize.

I've said this for pro-life and I am personally pro-life, I've written columns on that. I've said what I'm about to say to pro-life activists. Every poll I've ever seen in the last few years shows that the median voter in America is weakly pro-choice. What do I mean by that? It means that if you ask them about abortion that say that—I'm talking about the median person—they will say support *Roe v. Wade*. They say they will support legal abortion in the first trimester and they oppose it thereafter. That's the center of American public opinion of these voters who never prioritize issues when they go to vote.

The Court, if it does overrule *Roe v. Wade* or the *Dobbs* case, which they will almost certainly issue a ruling on by the end of the term, would make the issue alive in a way that it has not been alive during our lifetime. States do vote on various things regarding abortion, but no state law can contravene the federal constitutional law under *Roe v. Wade*. So that means for a lot of legislators in both directions it's been a freebie.

The Democratic party could take one position, knowing that the unpopularity of legal abortion in the third trimester matters to your party and it matters to your activists, but the other side can't do anything about it because the Court has ruled that out in *Roe*. And the same thing with the other side of the Republicans. Republicans have been talking about fetal heartbeat bills or banning abortion, you know, from conception and so forth. They can pander to their pro-life activists, knowing that it's a freebie and that their votes won't actually matter.

Now, if *Roe* is overturned, those votes matter. The hope of Democrats and pro-choice activists will be that that energizes the Democratic Party, but, as I mentioned, most of those voters are planning to vote anyway. What they hope is that it becomes an issue that turns out the Democratic-leaning, less frequent voters, and that it helps solve the turnout problem, and that it becomes an issue that weak pro-choice voters suddenly prioritize. That is a possibility, and I think that they will throw everything into it, particularly if everything else has failed.

You know if you're sitting here on July 4 and Joe Biden is minus fifteen in the polls and inflation is 9% and Russia and Ukraine are still in tension, Democrats will want an issue which they can run on nationally that poses a stark choice with the national Republican position. The poll data suggests it could succeed. We won't know whether it does succeed until they try it, and there are people in the Democratic camp I've seen suggesting this in Politico. If you're not reading the Washington Post, you should read Politico. And they talked about Democratic strategists who are weary of the success of that strategy, but I can guarantee you, it will be tried if *Roe* is overturned and we will know whether or not it is successful when the votes are counted.

QUESTION:

So, looking past the midterms to the next presidential election, do you think the Democrats should stick with Biden or move on to someone else?

OLSEN:

Well, you know. I'm forgetting which comic said this, but predictions are hard, especially about the future. Absent a very popular Biden, absent a dramatic turn around, this is going to be an eighty-two-year-old man who, in the best circumstances, is in the decline phase of his life. I hope to be as energetic as he is when I'm seventy. I hope to be as on top of things as he is as well. But he'll be eighty-two in 2024. I think absent a Biden who is obviously and clearly a shoo-in for reelection not because of who the Republican opponent is, but of his own success and turning things around, then they should not have Biden run.

Too many questions, not enough upsides to the man. Remember that this is a man who ran for office in 2008 and basically got nowhere. He tried to run in 2016, as the sitting Vice President, and got muscled out of the race by Bernie Sanders, who was not considered to be the strongest candidate in 2015. He didn't become "Bernie Sanders" until the 2016 race. Biden only succeeded when Democratic moderates noticed it was going to be Bernie or somebody else and nobody else could beat Bernie. Amy Klobuchar and Pete Buttigieg had no appeal to minority voters. Michael Bloomberg showed himself to be unpopular and Elizabeth Warren was ranked number two by left wing voters and was considered too far to the left for centrist voters.

So, you basically turn to Biden by default, so at least you've won something somewhere. You're St. George, go kill the dragon for us! So, let's not forget how he became president, and that he ran against the most unpopular president of our time. There's never been a time when people nationwide, Democrats or the general public, sat down and said, "You know what I need in my life? I need Uncle Joe." Even the polls before the election asked, "Are you voting for your candidate's policies or against the other guy?" For Trump about 3:1 among Trump supporters voting for Trump rather than against Biden. For Biden, it was fifty-fifty. That's the God's honest truth.

So, I don't know who they should nominate, and I don't know if Biden will want to go along with this. Biden has wanted to be President since God knows when, he certainly started talking about in the mid 1970s. And I think like most politicians, the idea was in his head much earlier than that. Unless we're seeing that in August of 2023 he has a 55% approval rating and he has moved up and completely turned things around, then I think you need to take a chance on somebody else.

QUESTION:

Thank you for coming and talking. I have a personal question, if you don't mind. Where did you find your passions in researching politics and then writing about it?

OLSEN:

Where do I find my passion?

QUESTION:

Yeah.

OLSEN:

I'm a nerd. Okay, now I recognize that comes as a shock to all of you. I don't know... What I can tell you is this: when I was six years old, I went through a Life magazine and took cut out pictures of Richard Nixon and Democrats campaigning in the New Hampshire primary and made a coloring book. I can tell you a lot of other stories about the 1968 election as well. I can't tell you, other than that. Perhaps it was the first book... it was the first book I remember reading when I lived in Chicago when I was four years old. And my parents signed up for a subscription in the Chicago Tribune, and they got a free book. It was a book about the Presidents of the United States. It is a wonderful white book and I still own it.

QUESTION:

I had another question. Have your views on politics changed as you've learned and written more?

OLSEN:

Yeah, my views on politics have changed in a significant way over the last fifteen years, in particular. I've always been a Republican. I was a traditional three-stool conservative Republican. I've never been the sort of person who just wants to stand up in here myself and scream. I like to get things done, so temperamentally I am a moderate conservative. But philosophically, until about 2009-2010, I was a pretty traditional libertarian conservative politician, on foreign policy mildly conservative, traditionally conservative on social policy and pretty, soft libertarian on economic policy and then I started to change my mind about a lot of things. I'm less hawkish than I was twelve years ago. I'm more favorable towards government intervention in the economy and the social safety net, and I'm more liberal on some issues such as diversity and inclusion, and I am more conservative on questions like abortion and the dignity of life.

QUESTION:

Do you see a difference between the expected red wave in congress and gubernatorial races?

OLSEN:

Historically they correlate less. While waves tend to produce down ballot outcomes in state legislative races, history has distinguished gubernatorial races. Which is why you've got Republicans as governors in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Maryland which are massively Democratic states. Meanwhile, you can have Democrats as governors in places like Louisiana and Kansas. So, I'm saying, going on history, I would say they are likely to correlate in swing states absent crazy candidates. But the strong personalities at the gubernatorial level can break through in a way that seems not to happen on the federal level.

However, that will just look at 2021 and say, Glenn Youngkin got his 12.1% swing and Jack Cittarelli got his 12.6% swing and Republicans, who basically didn't raise enough money to have enough airtime in Virginia, came out and won by nearly identical margins. The difference between Youngkin's winning margin and lowest ranking candidate, which was Jason Miyares for Attorney General running against the incumbent Mark Herring, was small. So, history tells me that gubernatorial candidates should be in the same vein to distinguish themselves. But I have to be aware of the possibility that too might be coming to an end.

QUESTION:

You talked about the effects of infighting in both parties, especially the Democrats—

OLSEN:

There is also infighting among Republicans, and I think that matters more, but go ahead.

QUESTION:

Do you think this infighting will lead to party splits down the road or do you think they'll find issues to reunify on?

OLSEN:

Tomorrow morning I'm going to give a talk in Mathematics and Democracy, so you're going to get a little bit of a preview. Voting systems matter. America is the only major democracy and one of the few major democracies where parties select their nominees through primaries rather than closed door selection that is limited to leaders or members. And it's the only major democracy, of which I am aware, where it is open not simply to dues paying members or people who proclaim allegiance, but to every voter. Now that differs from state to state. Some states have partisan registration, about half the states do not. Some states ban Independents from voting in partisan primaries so it's different from State to State.

But the partisan primary selection process that is wide open allows groups to effectively create multiparty politics in a two-party system. So, I believe I might have used this analogy when I was first here in 2017 or 2018. You know what Donald Trump effectively accomplished was a hostile takeover of the Republican Party. The example I have used many times is to imagine that you're a hamburger company. If you've got a new hamburger, you have to create a brand, buy a space, you have to do advertising – that's the same as a political party with new ideas. That's the way most of the world is. In the American system, instead of doing that, what you do is you go to your local primary ballot and you try to take over the local McDonald's. And if you win 50% of the vote, you can call it McDonald's but it won't serve McDonald's hamburgers. And that's why I don't think we're going to have party splits in this country. As long as both parties successfully navigate multiparty politics within their ranks, then no group has the incentive to leave. That's why you've got an increasingly dysfunctional party because you have a multiparty system without the mechanisms for multiparty cooperation.

Then you have other parties that are formally separate. The Netherlands has a system of proportional representation that is virtually unique in that it has no floor. So, the Netherlands has fourteen or fifteen parties. It took them seven months to form a government. But what they do have is a forty-to-fifty-page document that outlines exactly what all the parties in the government are going to do. They had to reach an agreement to form a government. And so, when any party is in power, they fight to say, “We literally can't take office without an agreement.” So, what we've got in the United States is multiparty politics and no feature that forces that sort of consensus.

So, they take office without an agreement and chaos is what we get to see. And you've got the Progressive Caucus and you've got the split off of the Progressive Caucus and then you've got the Democrats and Republicans, who are equally chaotic. So no, I don't think you're going to see more unity in that respect, and I think it is because of the primary process. American parties have always been discordant compared to European parties. But we don't have any more, so we have multiparty politics without features that make multiparty politics work.

QUESTION

I live in DC, and I want to be a journalist. Working at the Washington Post I'm sure that most of your coworkers have different views than you. I was just wondering if there were any workplace conflicts or issues that arise from that or if it is more of a professionalism vibe.

OLSEN

I am not a journalist by trade. I have had multiple careers in my life and I am the perfect example of what not to do if you want to be a journalist. But I was hired to be the conservative writer. The Post values, even as it has a strong central left Democratic Party tilt, it values and has valued for at least fifty years, having a strong and intelligent alternative. I'm not the only person, although I'm the only person who writes every weekday, so there are days when I will be the only person. As a result, it's a different workplace. I'm sure my colleagues read my stuff and have words, but they have never complained to me. I like my colleagues. I see them as human beings with different opinions, and I respect all of them. And in their presentations to me they share that, and I can't say what they say about me behind closed doors, but to my face interactions they value me as a human being and I find it a very rewarding place to work.