

[Transcript] The Realignment / 357 | The Revolts That Shock Britain and the Realignment of Western Politics with Matthew Goodwin

Marshall here. Welcome back to The Re-alignment.

This episode really brings the show back to its roots. Speaking with academic Matthew Goodwin, he's the author of a new book, really interesting. It's called Values, Voice, and Virtue, the New British Politics. We're focusing on a busier topic we've always loved covering on the show, populism, future of conservatism, and broadly, what the past 10 years of British politics have really been upended by revolts against party leaders, Brexit, all of those big debates, how many of these things have anything to do with what's happening in the United States and how they could shape how we think about the upcoming 2024 election and the Republican primary, it seems to come down to a contest between Donald Trump and Ron DeSantis.

A lot of great stuff in this episode and we'll get a kick out of it if you enjoy this.

You should definitely check out the Supercast where Sagar and I answer your questions from the audience

and go a little deeper into the topics that we're covering during the show.

You can go to realignment.supercast.com or click the link at the top of the show notes.

If you check your LinkedIn network for supporting our work, I hope you enjoy the conversation.

Matthew Goodwin, welcome to the realignment.

Thanks for having me, Marshall.

So your newest book out today is obviously about British politics, but considering that there are a large number of American listeners to the show, to what degree do you think it's useful to compare and contrast American and British politics?

Like what I'm telling the story of the realignment of this podcast will say something like, you had Brexit, then you had Trump obviously tying them together in some way, but how do you think about that idea?

Yeah, I mean, I think it's a great starter question.

I think, look, Americans can learn a lot from Britain regarding the political realignment and I think the Brits can learn a lot from America.

I mean, obviously we started off with Brexit and Trump and we had that 2016 moment that made everybody sort of put them together.

There were obviously some big differences, but there were a lot of similarities.

I mean, what I think you've got here are two centre-right parties, two conservative parties trying to figure out their way into holding and extending this new electoral coalition that they've put together over the last decade or so.

And at the same time, you've got two centre-left parties, the Democrats and Labour, trying to figure out how they can respond to that, how they can extend their reach beyond the cities, beyond the college towns and can try and find their way to some new coalition that will keep them in power or return them to power.

And I think, you know, also perhaps thirdly, I'd add that both countries are sort of grappling with the awareness now that can't be ignored by anybody,

that we have millions of voters out there who simply don't really relate to left or right, who don't really see themselves as being represented on the political landscape at all.

And this isn't just about politics.

This is also about the institutions, about media, creative industries, cultural institutions.

So I think there's a third similarity there.

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And if you talk to anybody where I'm talking to you from in the heart of Westminster, they will all say one thing, which is, how does Britain not become like America with the tribalism and the polarisation and the culture wars?

But I think Americans might want to ask themselves a similar question, which is, you know, what can we learn from Britain?

And hopefully I can share a few things today that might be of interest to them.

Yeah, so many places to go there.

I want to hope that people can keep up narratively.

So first question, which...

Let's focus on the Conservatives, obviously, because that's a lot of the topic of the book.

Which side British or American has done a better job navigating this dynamic?

Because it's really funny, because on the one hand, from a leadership perspective, Britain no offense has become almost somewhat of a joke, right?

You know, Liz Truss, and then you have Boris and you have Theresa May and all those different dynamics.

You have a top level, deeply unstable, but at the same time, from an electoral coalition's perspective, the Conservative Party has been incredibly successful.

In contrast to an American Republican Party where as soon as basically the 2016 election was over, you had a disastrous 2018 midterms, you obviously had a disastrous 2020,

and then you had a surprisingly, it wasn't a disaster at a pure level,

because the Republicans went back to the House, but they did not take the Senate when they expected to take the Senate.

So that's another disaster. So just compare and contrast the two parties from that perspective.

I think that's a great observation.

I think, look, I think the reason Americans should look at the British Conservative Party is because it's one of the most successful parties in the Western world, right?

It's controlled power in this country for 75% of the time since people got the vote.

It is incredibly successful.

And the reason for that success, one of the arguments at least in the literature is, is reinvention.

The British Tories have always reinvented themselves to meet the mood at the time.

You think about Margaret Thatcher reinventing herself amid the Cold War to overcome the paralysis of the state in the 1970s.

You know, her and Ronald Reagan obviously representing a different brand of conservatism.

You think then about David Cameron 2005.

He reinvents the Conservatives again to kind of try and reconnect them with sort of liberal middle class Britain,

you might say, talked a lot about the environment, talked about social liberalism.

And then you really had Brexit and you saw the reinvention of the party all over again,

where you have a succession of leaders who on the one hand acknowledged that the party has got to change,

on the other hand, they're not really sure what to do with it or how to bring about that change.

And that's basically the story of Theresa May, of Boris Johnson, Liz Truss, and now Rishi Sunak, that they are all and have all been leading a party that has won over historically unprecedented

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levels of support

from working class voters from non-college educated voters from small towns.

And they don't really know how to supply those voters with a meaningful message to keep them on board.

So on that basis, when we look at the US Republicans from where we are, what we see is a party that has successfully remolded itself around a new coalition.

That's brought problems and opportunities, obviously.

It's also injected American politics with a big dose of populism and Trump has brought a lot to the table.

But I think there's still an awareness that whether it's Ron DeSantis, whether it's Marco Rubio or Donald Trump,

or other frontline Republicans and the ecosystem around the Republicans as well, the think tanks, the magazines, newspapers and so on,

my view at least is that the Republicans look like they're having a more interesting intellectual debate about who they are

and where they need to go in order to keep tapping into that realignment.

And it might not be fashionable politics. It might not be nice moderate politics.

And there might be lots of reasons why we want to discuss the problems that come with that.

But compared to where the British conservatives are, who aren't even having that debate yet,

the Republicans look like they're now actually saying, well, what is conservatism in the early 2020s?

Should we intervene? Should we get comfortable with the state?

Where are we with regard to China or NATO? What are we doing about the institutions, schools, universities?

Where are we on migration and these sorts of issues?

That debate just isn't really happening here in any meaningful sense.

So the Republicans to us look to be frank, a lot more interesting, volatile, but interesting.

I guess the thing that I don't really understand, though, based on what you just said is, to what degree does that debate even matter? Because think of the British conservatives were able to go from David Cameron circa 2013, which we'll get into in a bit, to obviously being the party of Brexit.

And you could say that an intellectual perspective from you as an academic, me as a podcaster is a little less interesting, but it actually seems like from a pure, what is the purpose of a political party?

Is it the purpose of political parties to take coalitions of people who have certain priorities and then advances priorities? It seems like it's a tremendously successful institution, which in itself is kind of ironic.

So I guess to what degree do you think the British conservatives would be in a better position if there was more explicit debate versus okay, let's just sit in the room, read the quote unquote vibe, and then try to translate that into something.

I mean, I think you're on the money with that question.

I mean, essentially, if we had a leader or a dominant faction within the party, and remember all political parties are controlled by their dominant factions, if we had a dominant faction that truly understood the realignment,

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that really understood the potential coalition that existed in the country, then the last few years and the years to come would look very different. I'll give you an example. What basically happened in Britain, a little bit similar to the US, is by the time you got to the last election in 2019, the conservatives were invading the left's territory, winning over record numbers of blue collar workers, non-college educated voters, pensioners, some many voters who had never voted at recent elections before, and all of those people not only wanted to get Brexit done, they wanted to see that project delivered and implemented. They also had a number of specific requests over issues like migration. They wanted lower migration, regional development. They wanted areas outside of London, outside of the big cities, developed and improved. And more generally, they wanted a pushback against what we might call social liberalism, radical progressivism in the institutions. They were very distrustful of established politicians. Now, once the conservatives won over that coalition, it then began to do the opposite of what many of those voters were expecting. Boris Johnson, one of the most misleading comparisons in recent Western politics, is the comparison between Boris Johnson and Donald Trump. They are worlds apart. Boris Johnson is an instinctive liberal, really. He's very relaxed about these issues to do with migration and borders, presided over the rapid liberalisation of the immigration policy. And of course, that was opposite to what many of his voters wanted. Never really developed that regional levelling up, that improvement in the areas outside of London that they wanted. And never really invested as heavily, I think, as he should have done in the sort of non-college educated working class. People who wanted more investment. And that's where the party began to come unstuck. And there were some other mistakes along the way. He had parties in Downing Street during COVID, which didn't help. And his MPs never really accepted Boris Johnson because he's a very outlandish maverick figure. But the underlying core story here was a party that just could not reconcile itself with this more northern blue-collar, non-college educated coalition because it didn't know what to do with it. So if you replace Boris Johnson with that figure, a sort of, dare I say, a kind of Rondesantis figure, British politics would look radically different, would look radically different. So it's really a supply side issue that the British Conservatives have faced. And that, I think, is where the comparison with the US is instructive. No matter what you think about somebody like Donald Trump, whether you think he's risked for liberal democracy or not, the fact remains that he's had a series of unsuccessful elections. I agree with you on that.

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But I think he and the people around him have also grasped that there is no return to a sort of Mitt Romney-style brand of conservatism.

Whereas I don't think the British Conservatives have really grasped that.

I don't think they've accepted that there is no return to the pre-2016 conservatism.

And I think that's a key difference.

Okay, so that's a great pivot to 2013 because I think the first book of yours that you wrote with Robert Ford,

that's really relevant to this conversation, is called *Revolt on the Right*.

It's basically looking at the British political system in 2014 and saying,

there's a, I'm going to mix too many metaphors here, but there's something beneath the surface.

We're reaching a boiling point.

There's something happening here.

Describe for me what 2013 British politics looked like.

And just to give a quick example of this, when you're speaking about going back to Mitt Romney, the 2013 version of American politics is, okay, we just lost this election to Barack Obama.

We need to, let's say, reach out more to Hispanic voters.

We need to find ways to make concessions on issues such as gay marriage because we're out of step with the electorate on it.

We have to find a way to expand our coalition, body, body, body, body, because the Republican Party's lost 7 out of 8 popular elections.

That's the real Mitt Romney 2013 consensus there.

What is the version that you're referencing when you're saying parts of the British Conservative Party would like to go back to that?

Because you all don't have the same situation with tax cuts.

It's not quite the same metaphor there, so help us understand that.

Well, I think, firstly, it's fascinating going back and looking at that Romney period because the point about Hispanic Latinos was not inaccurate.

I mean, that was a good assessment, given where the Republicans are today, making some big inroads among those groups.

But actually, this kind of gets at your actual work, which is that the way that the Republican Party actually ended up getting there was different than the one you would have said in 2013.

So in 2013, the take was, okay, we need to improve our numbers of Hispanic Americans, immigration reform, amnesty, pick whichever word you want to use.

And this is separate from whether or not that's a good or not policy.

And that was a political call when actually the path that Donald Trump took the Republican Party on was what's up our votes with working class voters who will probably align with us for reasons of class and education, not necessarily race.

So that's an interesting example, but sorry, please go on.

No, I think that's a very good point because the assumption was very different.

In essence, I think Republicans were surprised by the scale of their gains among the Latino Hispanic working class voters.

But you see a very similar parallel here in Britain, and this is why I think we're a few years behind you.

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If you look at, say, some of the fastest growing groups in our electorate, if you look at British Muslims, Sikh, Hindu voters in very diverse communities, on the economic axis of politics, you know, they're with labor, right, 80%, 90% of voting for the Labor Party.

But if you if you probe them on cultural questions, which I think are central to the realignment, right?

If you probe them on migration, gender identity, teaching kids issues around LGBT type, type, type subjects, they're very, very conservative.

And I think probably if we end up replicating American politics and having these very polarizing debates about what's happening in the classroom as an example, then I think we'll start to see a similar shift, actually, to what America has seen with some of those minority voters in areas like Florida and elsewhere.

So it's just something to be aware of going going back to a question about the early 2010s.

Look, what happened is we had a liberal conservative, David Cameron, and his Chancellor George Osborne, who essentially stood in the legacy of Thatcherism and made a fundamental miscalculation. The way that I would tell British politics in a couple of lines, the last 20 years of British politics is like this.

Tony Blair and the Labor Party basically went all in on the university educated middle class and they assumed that workers had nowhere else to go.

They were followed by David Cameron and a liberal brand of conservatism that doubled down on the same groups of voters and assumed that traditional social conservatives had nowhere else to go.

So by the time you got to Brexit, millions of voters, both on the left and the right, had basically been left behind, not only economically by globalization, by the legacy of the financial crash, but also politically by their parties, which showed not much of an interest in them, culturally, because they held values that were not reflected in the values of the institutions and the national conversation.

And so they were primed for this rebellion on both the left and the right.

So the brand of conservatism that flourished just before those Trump and Brexit revolts was a very, very metropolitan London focused, middle class focused, socially liberal brand of conservatism that was out of sync with where the conservative electorate was basically.

And I want to take your point about they assumed that working class British voters are nowhere left to go and tie it back to your earlier comment when it came to seeks Muslims like other groups who agree with the left on economic questions,

you know, at the 90% rate, but on other issues, it's somewhat different is basically the assumption that in Britain, you're seeing increasing number of voters who are seeking to vote along, let's say, like cultural and social issues separate from

economic priorities because that's another question that comes after that comment would just be the way you're seeing that dynamic replicated in the United States is you have let's say the Donald Trump wing of the Republican Party saying things like, look, we've got the working class voters when it comes to social cultural issues. But the way we consolidate those gains as we say, look, we are no longer trying to abolish entitlement programs as we know it, like this is a sort of small fight that's happening between the Trump wing and the DeSantis

and of course the Mitt Romney wing the is the Republican Party going to accept New Deal liberalism

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in that sense and just move on because that's where the voters are, you might not agree with LGBTQ policy but guess what you like social security.

Is there an equivalent debate in the UK because obviously your economic you don't have an equivalent of social security where the right was spending you know 80 years trying to change it in different ways, or maybe you do have one I'd love I'd love to hear that.

Well, I mean we what we have is our national health service which is, you know, the closest that we've got to a state religion or a third row of politics in that sense.

I mean, it's it's it's remarkable and there is a fault line for sure in British politics between, you know, a Labour Party that historically owns that issue that is seen to want to invest in the national health service.

And then on the other side, a Conservative Party that voters are suspicious wants to essentially put tax cuts before anything else and strip away investment in public services and one of the reasons why your viewers and listeners might know that that

Liz Truss, a Prime Minister who lasted only 45 days was so unpopular, was because really voters could sense that what she was offering was a sort of an almost extreme factor out vision of the country which was overwhelmingly focused on tax cuts and

regulating the economy and helping finance in London, and was not sufficiently in sync with the rest of the country when it came to things like public services and what you'd call social security and if you took an average voter in Britain,

an average voter basically leans a bit left on the economy and leans a bit right on culture that's basically your your average British voter so when the Conservatives have have been socially liberal and economically liberal.

They've really fallen out of love among voters and it's been a really big, big problem so so the reason Boris Johnson was so successful in 2019 was because he not only promised to get Brexit done but he also appeared to voters to kind of grasp that.

He talked about investment in the National Health Service he talked about building more hospitals, he talked about trying to level up the country, and he also seemed to in 2019 seem to give an impression that he wanted to get Brexit done.

He wanted to control immigration and so there was that left on economy right on culture presentation that voters have been looking for now what happened once he entered office was something very different you know we had the

COVID pandemic and he ended up liberalizing immigration and voters quickly became quite disillusioned with what what Boris Johnson was about as an individual.

But the underlying story I think is a party that has very often in its history become disconnected from this realignment partly because of the people who dominate the upper echelons of the party and dominate the donor networks of the party and that's left it very vulnerable.

You know and I think that supply side has never really been quite sort of in sync with the public demand.

I guess the question I'll ask you is do you think so two questions ask you the first one is Britain better off after Brexit.

Then it would have been as the status quo continued because it's interesting because it's a mix of policy question and a political question.

Yeah yeah well it depends I mean look it depends on what your prize right I mean look objectively if

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you look at the data if you look at the economic impact of Brexit.

Firstly it's very difficult to disentangle that from covid and the energy crisis.

And and and also partly the war in Ukraine but I am sort of one over by by the argument that Brexit has until now had a significant negative net impact on the economy okay.

However.

I also know from my own research and research of others that the reason why people voted to leave the European Union was not chiefly because of economics right that there were very strongly felt concerns about wanting to be a self governing nation.

About wanting to have a accountable transparent democracy and wanting to lower or be able to control inward migration.

But now on all of those things you can't measure very difficult things to measure but on all of those things obviously the UK has now begun to diverge from the European Union.

We've begun to repeal EU laws and we've begun to pivot away from the European Union in all kinds of areas take financial regulation as an example.

We've been giving the city and other areas of the economy you know looser regulations than we would have had were we in the European Union.

Now we can argue whether that should have been the priority after Brexit or not but we're beginning to see that divergence.

So if you're a Brexit voter what I'm trying to say is you probably are a little bit poor as a result as a result of Brexit.

But you will be also offsetting that against your knowledge and understanding of the fact that you are now in a self governing independent nation that can decide laws and regulations and rules for itself and is not beholden to the European Union.

So it's not an answer that everybody in my in my world of academics would give but it's it's the one that I would give and it's a mixed bag.

I guess the difficult follow up question from that is should British politics be organized around the wants and whims of Brexit voters because to your point you're pointing out you know the economic performance is down.

You're also discussing how a part of the Tory political political you know coalitions obviously that Brexit voter maybe is preferencing the cultural the socio cultural over the economic.

Do you think to a certain degree that's helpful because like once again I think that the use of comparison here too is in the United States like there's a version of this country where we organize our political or where the Republican Party.

Organizes itself around like the wants and specific needs of like working class whites and very specific parts of the country.

But there may be a gap between that and what say a desired outcome because part of your critique of the Labour Party was Labour Party organized itself around the wants and needs of the British upper middle class and you know professionals and university graduates.

I'm just asking the what say what the more policy in nation centric version of that question rather than than the like obviously you could get to 50 plus one with that coalition part of the question.

Well I mean I suppose my answer to that would be these voters are as much in the national conversation and the public square.

As other voters the difference being they've not really been able to influence or shape the public

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policy environment as much as as much as other voters have and if you look at the last 20 30 years in British politics the policy agenda the prevailing culture the political direction of the country has been shaped by groups of voters that voted against Brexit that it has been shaped by middle class professionals it's been shaped by the winners of globalization and I do actually think that the silver lining in not just Brexit but populism more generally is it forces democracies to be more responsive it forces democracies to be more responsive to groups that have historically been underrepresented in the institutions and which as a lot of research shows have been excluded from the policy making process I mean if you are you know part of the working class in Britain or the nongraduate majority or you live well away from London you know you have been excluded from many of the public policies that have been passed over the last 20 30 years many of the governments that have been controlling Westminster and Whitehall have been overwhelmingly dominated by elite graduates from private schools and top universities who have a very different set of values and the rise of this diploma democracy I actually do think is one of the reasons why we've also been grappling with with populism because many voters feel that they don't have a voice within this public square so if we're forced to deliver things like Brexit we're forced to revisit our immigration policy we're forced to think about regional inequality in a more nuanced sophisticated way we're forced to rethink our political economy my personal view is that's a good thing of course it's difficult of course people in London and Oxbridge don't like it of course the university class loathe everything about Brexit like I understand that I'm in that world but to build a better stronger more united unified national economy and democracy everybody's voice has to be included which is why to be frank when Brexit was voted for and I didn't personally vote for it but I did shrug my shoulders and think well we better get on and do it which is a very different reaction from many people in my my world which was let's overturn it which I didn't think was a sustainable position on being yeah I like the way you kind of reframed my point which is that the whole point of a shock to the political system is to prevent is to provide a correction point so if you're organizing your politics around the the American the American equivalent would be sort of Richard Florida is like creative class discourse from the 2000s if you're if that's the system that we have that obviously led to some bad a was a bad it was a bad like political framework but it led to bad policy outcomes so the way that in a democracy this representative you actually offered you say actually we need to focus on this thing that's that's helpful so that's actually on that because you mentioned Florida so now you've now you've kind of figured you have course but you're right I mean this is a great example of where the American debate is ahead of is ahead of the British debate I mean when I talk about the rise of a new middle class graduate professional elite I'm talking about the Bobo's I'm talking about the bourgeoisie Bohemians I'm talking about the creative class I'm talking about the group that probably at best represents 20% of Britain but which you've debated in American politics for a while right you guys have had this debate you've discussed the the rise of this group and also the influence that it's had and some of the mistakes it's made along the way and I'm not saying I'm not saying that these people are bad people I'm not saying I'm not

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punishing them for these terrible decisions but I am saying they became very isolated from the rest of the country and they were very cognizant of just how many people do not share their values and do not share their policy priorities so that so across the West not just Britain and America but when I look at Europe from the 80s to today and you look at you know what's happening in France and Italy and Sweden with the rise of populism to me this is all part of the corrective you know this is all a response to representative democracies that were not very representative of very large groups and society and that comes with a lot of ugly stuff it comes with a lot of risks and potentially an erosion of democratic norms right which we also have to be very receptive to but over the last 20 years I've not heard much reflection about how liberalism and also the governing class overreached at a number of policy areas and that essentially is what I think has happened in Britain.

You know it's interesting I want to speak to the center left here and just the left broadly. You have a good line in your book which I think has really shaped the way I've thought about the space for the past few years which is all realignments generate reactions. So it's easy to say to like listen to the first half of this podcast and say to yourself okay so here's the path forward. If you are a Republican if you're a conservative your your your priority is exploiting this vulnerability that the Democratic party that the Labor Party has with working class voters appeal to them on culture, make a few pivots on economic questions, etc etc etc and that's how you build durable governing majorities that then realign American politics in the same way that Thatcher realigned British politics in the 80s, FDR realigned and FDR realigned American politics in 1932-1933. The problem though and this has manifested itself in America I'm curious how it's manifested itself in Britain, the United Kingdom. Okay here's a quick pause. How should I refer to the UK because I said Britain, I've said the UK, I'm not going to say England because obviously like that's more complicated but what should my generic phrasing for your country England is a whole other subject which is another point. I mean if you want to refer to, I run a module at university on British politics but lots of people particularly when discussing the EU refer to the UK would prefer to refer to the UK but I think the issue about England is once you take away London, that's where the left has had a really big problem with the realignment. So once you take away Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales, London and university towns, what you're left with is England and what you're left with is a predominantly working class, culturally conservative, non-university educated part of the country where Labour has not won the popular vote even today since 2001.

So for more than 20 years Labour has not won the popular vote in England since 2001 and when we talk about realignments, we talk about geographical polarisation. Well if you want an example of that, I think look at England versus London.

Somebody once said to me, if you want to understand the divides in the UK, you want to think about things like convincing Scotland to stay in the UK is like convincing London to vote for Brexit because we've got this extreme geographical polarisation now like you guys. I mean we have London moving rapidly away politically, socially,

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economically from the rest of the country. Scotland becoming very liberal, almost what you might call radically

progressive, almost Canadian in how it views issues and Scotland is on its own journey. Wales is increasingly I think going to follow Scotland and that is inevitably going to leave England as this big piece of territory, very

conservative and I think the fragmentation of the UK is going to remain very visible for the next few years and decades for sure.

So I guess the question when it comes to backlash to the original point is just that we have that idealised, we're the party of the working class story now, but what happened in America was that that same change of

priorities activated other parts of other coalitions. So you could say I'm Donald Trump, I'm going to build the wall, I'm going to have a Muslim ban, I'm going to do a variety of policies that really get a working class base excited, but you also

piss off suburban moderate voters used to vote Republican in Georgia, in Arizona, in Pennsylvania, and that explains and then also you indulge in like election denier fantasies that may excite your base but also deeply turn off moderate even

moderate voters that you need to turn out or at least not turn out for Democrats. That's the explanation of what happened in 2018, 2020, 2022. Yeah, why hasn't the Labour Party been able to take advantage of the fact that obviously

Brexit would piss off traditionally, let's say like you all don't have country clubs but like the UK members clubs. Okay, so the members club Tories, they should be up for grabs when it comes to Labour maybe I guess I guess Jeremy Corbyn becomes a problem

so yeah just just explain why why has not the center left to left in the UK, then able to take advantage of the of the reaction against the realignment of the right that Democrats would do.

I think it's a great question I mean I, I think the first the first reason is we need to think about the structural problems that face some of the left party so one is, as I say geography, Labour over the last decade has been hoovering up votes among millennials zoomers from Gen Z

graduates and minority voters so over the last 10 years all of those groups have been trending left even before Brexit, and that's very similar I think to the US. The problem Labour has is those, those groups concentrate in the same kinds of areas.

In London University cities, urban areas and in the first pass or post system as you know, that can become a nightmare for a left party. So if you look at, say, the 2019 general election which Boris Johnson won comfortably, he only won 44% of the popular vote but he won an 18% majority. So what happened to the rest of the vote well it was, it was divided between Labour, the Liberal Democrats, the Greens, the SNP, the Scottish National Party, all of whom, all of whom are post Brexit, but that vote was divided, it was then concentrated in particular parts of the country which made it almost impossible for Labour to win under under first pass the post, and also, crucially to answer your specific question about those Conservative Liberals, or who we might call Conservative Remainers here people who who wanted to remain in the European Union who wanted to remain like Brexit. Well, about a quarter of that group, crucially, refused to leave the Conservatives in 2019. They stayed with the Conservatives even though they hated what Boris Johnson was saying even though they hated the idea of Brexit.

They put their party loyalty ahead of their Brexit identity. Now, why did they do that? One reason

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was Jeremy Corbyn, right, they hated the Labour leader, he was a very kind of, you know, hard left old school socialist who really did generate very strong emotions, but more fundamentally, they were pragmatic on Brexit. And this is the thing I think a lot of my colleagues and friends got wrong actually about Brexit. I think there was an assumption after 2016 that everybody in the country was kind of down with this idea of reversing Brexit, kind of overturning it. Let's have another referendum. Let's get rid of it. What where I think that went wrong is I think that violated something that I can't, I can't show you data for this. This is just simply me speculating, but it violated a very strong cultural tradition in Britain, which is that of fair play, the idea that once something happens, you respect it and you just deal with it. And I think after the Brexit referendum, the problem Labour and other left parties had is that between a third and a half of the remain vote basically said, you know what, I don't want to overturn it. It's happened. Let's deal with it. Let's just make it work. So there wasn't that groundswell of appetite that might have generated this much stronger reaction.

Now, that reaction is coming, like that reaction you see in the data. I mean, if you look at how young people are planning to vote next year, if you look at how young women especially are planning to vote next year, if you look at graduates, if you look at minority voters, I mean, we're talking about 80% Labour. So the reaction to the realignment of the last 10 years is already coming, like it's already on route, and it will probably sweep away the Conservatives at some point. But in the context of how Brexit was made possible and how Boris Johnson was made possible, they simply didn't have the numbers. They didn't have the breadth and they didn't have the commitment among voters after the Brexit referendum to bring that to mobilize that reaction earlier. And that's essentially how Johnson was able to win that massive majority.

And I think your explanation gets at the differences between American politics in the late 2010s and British politics in the sense that Brexit really was the perfect issue to advance a populist right perspective in Britain from because it was one that was obviously noxious to some parts of the electorate, but it wasn't just so noxious that you would lose that you were still able to retain those, you know, those voters, those remainers, those remainers when it seems like the set of issues that Republicans had to deal with, they were just too many.

You can't have COVID response and election denial and the wall. It just seems like you really had just like 10 different areas where it was just unsustainable. And then also then you had individual political candidates. So right. If you're if you're looking to stay like Pennsylvania.

It's not just Trump. It's like you literally have a, you know, Republican gubernatorial candidate who was talking about trying to overturn the 2024 election. It just seems impossible for one party or coalition to keep together in the face of that.

But in this last section, I'd like to get really to your book because you know this you've been writing about the populist movement for over for over 10 years. I think these conversations have transitioned into the OK, we get it in the sense that, you know, we there's been enough data.

Right. It's not 2015. It's not 2016. We're not speculating. This becomes literal. So several things I want to go through here. So, so number one, what do we all do with this? Yeah.

Because because I think what makes this book and your most recent book from 2018 so interesting is that you're writing about how these are broad like socio-cultural political forces that are sweeping through Western societies. So even if you are the most center left Joe Biden Democrat or the most

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far left Jeremy Corbin Labour Party member,

you have to reckon with these forces for good or for ill. Yeah.

What's just your broad framing for how Western society should think about this?

Yeah. Well, I think I think it's it's the million dollar question. So I think if you a lot of the points I've made over the last five years, come back to this point about representation.

I really do feel quite strongly that there are some quick wins that Democrats could put into place and I would consider myself to be a disgruntled Democrat who is sort of watching from the sidelines. Democrat, you mean in the wake?

Sorry. Yeah, I don't mean I don't mean a US Democrat. Although in the past, I certainly would have described myself that way. But I mean, as in a believer in the system of democracy.

Look, I mean, the groups, I think if you looked at it on paper, it's quite straightforward. The groups that have been voting for these parties. Remember, also, I'm shaped by my experience in Europe as well.

OK, in France, in Italy and elsewhere. These are groups that have been pretty consistently excluded from politics from the media discussion and creative industries from cultural institutions.

If you're working class, if you haven't gone to college, if you are culturally conservative, you have very good reason to feel that you're not included in the corridors of power and you're not included in the national conversation about who we are.

And I think there are some easy things that we could do, particularly left parties could do to give those groups a greater sense that they're represented.

If you look at the Labour Party in Britain, 90% now belong to the graduate class. Only 30% of the country have a degree.

Half of them have gone to Oxbridge. I mean, and this is a Labour Party. The biggest single group within the Labour Party are political careerists who have only ever spent their lives in politics.

OK, have never had other careers, have never kind of done anything else. So I think there's a representation point, first and foremost, which I think is critically important.

But my second point is one my many friends in the Labour Party never like to hear, which is compromise.

There has to be a compromise on these cultural questions. There has to be a new consensus around these issues to do with migration, around these issues to do with the integration into the social fabric of minorities and new arrivals.

There has to be a consensus around what the values of our society are going to be. And I think there's a third specific challenge for the centre left, which American viewers might not necessarily want to hear or like to hear.

But I think they need to do a much better job at calling out the more radical, progressive voices that are pushing policies that are opposed by a large majority of voters.

I'll give you one example that I think will speak to the American experience. We had a piece of legislation in Scotland recently called the Gender Recognition Reform Bill, which would allow children, 16 year olds to legally change their gender without any medical supervision.

And they only needed to live in their new gender for two weeks and then they'd get a certificate and they would legally transition or they'd legally have a new gender.

Voters did not care about this issue when it was brought forward. But because radical progressives wanted to make this big battle over this issue, they wanted to kind of put this forward.

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It became a massive issue. And when we pulled voters on it, only 20% supported it and 80% opposed it, 80%. And what happened after that was pulled that law.

Nicola Sturgeon lost her job as the leader of the SNP. The independence movement in Scotland was knocked back years, perhaps decades, and voters became aware of the fact that there is this project or this idea that is trying to bring about these policies which are wildly unpopular.

And I could show you a whole list of other things that would convey the same point around policies on migration to how we refer to women and so on. And I do think this isn't just about cultural wars. I do think the center left, in the same way that the center right has to isolate and moderate hardcore populace, I think the center left needs to do a much better job at dealing with radical progressives. And it has to basically say, look, we're not going to push policies that are wildly unpopular. We're not going to promote ideas that are going to alienate millions of Hispanic and Latino or African American voters defund the police or whatever it is.

And unless this begins to happen, moderates and independents, I think are going to be increasingly alienated by both sides, which is what I think you saw the midterms.

I mean, the moderates and independents seem to swing to the Democrats partly because Trump, you know, Trump reminded them of all of these crazy people over here.

But also, the Democrats had, you know, that sort of distracted from the internal difficulties that the Democrats have as well.

And I think it's going to be a difficult challenge. Those are the three things I would instantly point to as things you could meaningfully do something about.

Man, something I'm wondering, you're just bringing up Nicholas George, Georgian, and we're talking about Theresa May and Liz Truss and Boris Johnson.

The British, you all do a real incredible job when it comes to just overthrowing leaders who are seen to have made mistakes.

And this is separate from the, you know, critique of American gerontocracy, which I think has kind of gone too far and is kind of a little separate from like analytical logic.

I mean, what I'm really saying here, though, is the American political system is one where Hillary Clinton, despite losing the 2008 primary, despite having weaknesses leading into 2016 is able to win the Democratic Party's nomination.

Donald Trump has a lot of severe weaknesses. He's made a lot of mistakes.

I think more likely than not, he defeats Ron DeSantis in the primary.

I'm just struggling to think of an example in American politics of someone like Sturgeon losing power over just one vote. This is just like a total difference, a real lack of, I'd say, almost like voter or institutional loyalty to politicians. Is that a good thing or a bad thing?

Well, I mean, if you look back at the 2019 general election, every single leader of our political parties is gone, you know. So is that rate of turnover a good thing?

I mean, not if you're wanting to solve the longer term problems that are facing the country, but if you're, you know, wanting a system that is broadly responsive and accountable, then perhaps it is.

I mean, why have they gone? Nicola Sturgeon also partly went because of rumors of financial irregularities. Boris Johnson went because he lied to the country.

I think that's a good thing that he went. Jeremy Corbyn went because he failed a massive election test and was also seen as a security risk.

Were he to become prime minister? So I think each of them have gone, you know.

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Sorry, why is that? I realize that you're in British politics, but I think for the American listener, they're like, whoa.

Jeremy Corbyn was not only a failure at elections, but there was a very serious concern about the extent to which he would support NATO and maintain the UK's relationships with powers like the United States of America.

I mean, Corbyn comes from, you know, the sort of anti-imperialist hard left. I mean, watching by the way Jeremy Corbyn managed the war in Ukraine as prime minister would have been quite the experiment in standing up against Russia.

I mean, that would have been very odd and remarkable to have watched that taking place.

And remember, had only college educated voters been able to vote, Jeremy Corbyn would have been prime minister. I mean, the only group that he led among were graduates.

So it's worth always remembering that. What we've got in Britain is record levels of volatility.

So we've got record levels, numbers of voters changing their vote choice, which is why I don't think this realignment is over.

I do think, as I say in the book, we just press pause. You know, I think the realignment is going to continue to work its way through the system.

I was talking with a French journalist this morning who was reflecting on where Macron goes amid the French realignment, you know, and he made the very good point.

You know, he said, well, Macron is third. All we know is the realignment is either going to be led by Marine Le Pen or Jean-Luc Mélenchon.

You know, he's kind of populist left populist right, you know, you look at Italy, Georgia Maloney, number one in the polls came from nowhere.

That party brothers of Italy came from nowhere now running the country. You look at Sweden where it was last month.

The Swedish post war consensus has completely collapsed. New parties have emerged for similar reasons that we're talking about.

The old parties lost touch with these voters on cultural questions, and that has created space for these new insurgents to rise.

So I don't think any of this is actually going to disappear anytime soon.

I think it is. It's about the combination of supply and demand.

And if you look ahead to next year, we've got these two huge natural experiments.

Trump proved that he's now an election loser, right, and go into that election. And I agree with you.

I think he'll be the nomination, you know, will he lose or will he reconnect with that realignment and conversely on the other side of the Atlantic?

You know, will Rishi Sunak be able to repair this realignment or will KIRSTAMA be able to sort of try and push it back towards labor's direction?

And all of this is going to be shaped by the ongoing politics of inflation, which is why, by the way, Trump did so badly at the midterms.

Because if you look at every election that's been held around the world since inflation, incumbents have been absolutely battered.

They've either lost power or they've been weakened, which is why my personal view is Trump should have done a lot better at the midterms.

There's something fundamentally come unstuck with his relationship with his voters.

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So two last big questions. So one, this is just a theory I'd like to try on for you.

To your point with 2022, the thought that voters were going to punish Joe Biden, we're going to punish the Democrats, inflation, Ukraine war, energy costs, etc.

That wasn't true. And actually, in the swing states that made the difference, it was the broader, it's so unsexy to say this.

I think it's kind of disappointing, but actually, the generic conventional wisdom about actually there are going to be a lot of voters who vote on the pure democracy question just ended up being true.

So to what degree do you think populists are leaning too far into an anger revolt narrative, which is six or seven years out of date, like I watched Marjorie Taylor Greene and Lauren Boebert.

And I just get the sense that they, if the critique of the Hillary Clinton, Brooklyn campaign team in 2016 is that they did not understand how angry the country was and therefore didn't go campaign in Wisconsin.

I think the critique of the populist right in 2023 in the United States at least is they don't understand how exhausted the populace is by that backlash, how disinterested and disengaged from politics they are and how political moves or articulations that lean too much into that

2017 framework just do not resonate. That's my personal take. I'm curious what you think about that. I mean, I think it's a very, it certainly would fit with the British experience that one of the things that Brexit did was it basically through the entire system into paralysis.

And if you ever want an example of that, I'd urge you to go on YouTube and look up Brenda from Bristol when she's told that there's another election that's got to take place to get this Brexit thing sorted and this kind of little old lady looks at the camera

and she says, oh, another one and expresses this complete exasperation on behalf of the country. And there is exhaustion, but I think also my take would be that it's not just exhaustion.

I think for a large number of voters, it's also a sense that, you know, they were overpromised, populist overpromise and underdeliver. And I think that if you look at conservative voters, if you probably look at Republican voters, I think they would probably share a sense that these great projects that they live through, you know, the Trump presidency, the Boris Johnson Premiership, never really actually delivered all that much for them. Certainly in the case of Boris Johnson, I mean, if you were in the red wall, the working class area

like our Rust Belt and you voted for Johnson, I mean, you basically got slapped in the face. You know, I mean, he even removed a requirement that British businesses have to advertise jobs in Britain first before advertising them overseas.

I mean, this is like 101 neoliberal kind of global economics. I mean, and what these voters were wanting was something, you know, completely different. And I think there was a point about delivery and the inability of populism to live up to its promises.

But one of, you know, one of my favorite essays on this was Margaret Canavan, who wrote a great paper, which you'll get on Google Scholar called The Two Faces of Populism. And, you know, and she did make the point in this like 99, late 90s, she said,

populism always will always be in democracy. It's the shadow of democracy, right, that when she used the oak shop framework, she said that when bureaucrats and technocrats and the experts go too far, populism is the corrective.

It injects a system with belief, with ideology, with passion, you know, with, with salvation, as far as many voters are concerned. But that goes too far too, right? That goes too far. And then the experts

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and the technocrats and the bureaucrats get back on board and they say, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, you know, we've got to maintain the norms and the procedures and the frameworks and the checks and the balances. And in Canavan, just describe basically democracy like the seesaw, you know, that you've got these two conflicting political styles that basically are always competing, always rubbing up against one another. So you will get the Trump presidency, but you will get the Biden presidency and response, right? And it may be that actually what you're sensing.

And I sense it too here in Britain is voters are just saying, you know what, let's have a little bit less politics of faith. Let's have a bit more politics of managerialism, a bit more politics of competency, a bit more politics is getting things done.

And I think probably with the cost of living crisis inflation and all of these macroeconomic wins that voters are dealing with, I think, you know, that makes a lot of sense.

So here's the closing question, especially because you referenced neoliberalism. Obviously, it's been a topic that we've favored on this podcast. The quick takeaway is just that you really tell the story of post 1980s politics as being one defined by

hyper globalization, like a very specific story, the story being, and this is separate from, you know, just, I mean, it gets political, but there's like an internal narrative that the sort of managerial elite who were critiquing

here are giving, which is that like, look, the world changed after the end of the Cold War, the world is global, what matters is getting as many people in like academic seats as possible so they could upscale themselves.

Immigration this, this, this, and it was a very straightforward story that I think a lot of people thought was just the way things were, and didn't understand how much of that was actually a set of political judgments that often more often than not like favored them

if your university graduate, you propping up a system built around that is much easier than trying to build something different. What takeaway would you offer to our neoliberal listeners of which there are more of a decent amount.

What story should they tell themselves so that when they're trying to form a consensus, right, because that's that's the actual objective how do you form a consensus, they can govern a system, they can have something that's rooted in truth

like I've got the world is flat behind me here somewhere. If it's the year 2004, like that plus the creative class book by Richard Florida, that would be just like peak, what a Harvard graduate assumes about the world.

What alternate story would you offer for the 2020s onwards that could ground nonpopulous and coming to the table.

Well, that's a really, that's a really big question.

It's a book so you can give us a big and you're welcome to give a vague answer if necessary.

No, it's it's a great question. I mean, I, I, I talk at length about how, you know, the sort of hubris of the late 90s and the early 2000s really got carried away.

A lot of the evidence that's emerging today in economics and, and elsewhere is pretty convincing, you know, in terms of, in terms of whatever your preferred term, a commitment to use hyper globalization drawing on Danny Roderick and I'm sure others will have their preferred, but this sort of, you know, the big liberalization of finance of other economies and

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deregulation had had, you know, clearly very disproportionate effects and really did smash workers and a noncollege educated voters and specific parts of the Western economy and we're still living with the consequences of that. So I don't think there's any way back for people who were involved with that project that doesn't involve reinventing their message and their narrative that in a way that becomes genuinely one nation. And this is the problem that conservatives in Britain have had, which is how do you upskill, repair and renew your relationship with voters that also partly blame your party for half a century of creative destruction and, and a legacy of misery and, and now we're left with deaths of despair and all the rest of it. And I think it's been very difficult for the conservatives and they've, I think so far showing themselves unable to do that, and they've, they've, they've backed off. So to me, I think it's going to be about trying to come up with an offer that is very, very different from the, from the 80s and the 90s that is actually accepting of the limits of globalization, that is much more perhaps accepting of shorter supply chains of investing in domestic workers, investing in upskilling and training in building more things domestically in doing some of the things now even the Labour Party here is talking about you talk about how to respond to a realignment or the Labour Party if you look closely at the economic policy, it's talking about, you know, nearshoring, breaking up long supply chains, investing in a new green revolution, building more things in Britain, buying more things in Britain. You know, not necessarily committing to the breakup of globalization per se, but certainly accepting that there needs to be more of a balance in how we've structured the economy. And that's, that's the starting place. I think just, as I said earlier on, trying to get yourselves into a position of compromise. Not an easy thing to do when passions run so high on either side, but I think that's the only realistic way forward.

That is an excellent place to leave it. Matthew, can you shout out this book and any previous books you've written that listeners would want to check out?

Yeah, this book is called Valleys, Voice and Virtue, the new British politics published at the end of this month by Penguin. So this is the book that I'm kind of wanting everyone to read. So I'm going to leave it there.

Great. Thank you for joining me on the realignment.

Thank you. Thanks for having me. It was genuinely a great discussion and it's always nice to talk with somebody who actually knows what they're talking about. So thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

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Great. See you all next time.