

[Transcript] The Ezra Klein Show / A Conservative on How His Party Has Changed Since 2016

From New York Times Opinion, this is the Ezra Klein Show.

Hey, it is Ezra.

I am on book leave, but this week, taking a turn at the mic is the Great Jane Kostin.

She's a Times Opinion writer.

She has done years of work covering modern republicanism, conservatism, the populist right, and all the schisms and fractures within the topic we've been trying to do more work on.

So I was grateful she was willing to come on the show and do some conversations around it.

Enjoy.

In 2016, the Republican Party was the party of foreign policy interventionism, free trade, and cutting entitlements.

That's not the party of 2024.

In the last seven years, Donald Trump has completely transformed the Republican Party.

Or has he?

If so, why are so many of his competitors trying to sound like him on some issues,

I cannot say on health care.

I wanted to have a conversation that takes a step back from the primary and explores how the party has changed since 2016,

the different factions that have emerged in the wake of Donald Trump,

and what all of that could mean for the party's future.

And the person I wanted to have that conversation with is Ben Dominic.

Dominic is a longtime conservative writer, a former speechwriter in the second Bush administration, a founder of several right-leaning outlets, including Red State and the Federalist.

He's been around the right-wing bloc a few times.

But most importantly, he's someone on the right who I think best represents some of those questions around what was wrong and right

with the pre-Trump Republican Party, how Trump changed things, and what a post-Trump GOP could look like.

As always, you can email the show with your thoughts and guest recommendations at Ezra Klein Show at nytimes.com.

Ben Dominic.

Ben Dominic, welcome to the Ezra Klein Show.

Great to be with you.

You've said that Donald Trump broke open a policy consensus on the American right that needed to be broken open.

What was that consensus and why did it need to be broken open?

So I think that the consensus that he primarily broke was one that had a very top-down approach to policy that was very much out of touch on the American right.

And to an extent, this kind of goes back to the, what's the matter with Kansas question?

Why do Republican voters who seem to have these different experiences in the middle class in America?

Why are they voting for these politicians who seem to be more about big corporations or multinational global interests or things along those lines?

Why aren't they voting for more populist economic policies?

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And at the same time, why are they voting for people who basically have an open borders approach to immigration or a particularly neoconservative focus to foreign policy?

When those are things that basically, with rare exceptions, notably in the immediate aftermath of 9-11 or things like that, those are not typically the strains of the right.

They tend to be very pro-military, but tend to be reluctant about deployment of actual Americans overseas.

They're generally opposed to Wilsonian do-gooder foreign policy in a lot of different ways.

Why does this happen?

And that really depends on a consensus, a post Cold War consensus advocated for by a lot of people that was not particularly representative of what your average Republican voter wanted.

And I think that in breaking open that consensus, Trump performed a valuable act.

The problem is, of course, that all that he really does is break those consensus.

He doesn't offer really a coherent alternative, I think, in terms of his approach to governance, because everything about him is, you know, this kind of animal motivation in different directions.

You've written on this old consensus, and let's call that Boomer Republicanism.

You wrote that Boomer Republicanism had its day, and it gave us George W. Bush and Donald Trump.

Now, first and foremost, between those two people are three terms in the White House.

Boomer Republicanism, one, you go from the Republican Revolution in 1994.

You got the Republicans the control of Congress for the first time since 1952 and made my parents very mad.

Pretty much from 1994 to 2006, you have unprecedented wins on every level of government, not just at the federal level,

but you have wins in state houses, you have wins in the local level.

The American South basically becomes a Republican stronghold.

Florida, that will change later.

There are going to be a couple of states where they're going to have Democratic wins, but those Democrats are probably more bright-leaning because, you know, there used to be right-leaning Democrats and left-leaning Republicans.

This used to be a thing that we all had. It happened. I was there.

So, like, Republicans, they were winning. They were winning.

And then Obama won. And then again, Republicans won again in 2010.

Republicans won again in 2014.

So why did that consensus need to be broken if it worked?

Well, first off, I would say I think that the 2000 election is one of those interesting moments where you have this very narrow George W. Bush victory that only happens because of the system that we have.

Yet you look back at kind of those two people and you see how much the parties have changed since.

You made reference to the presence of conservative Democrats, you know,

really all the way up through the exit of like Bart Stupak and the handful of people who forced Obamacare to be different on abortion issues

than some people wanted. That was a very real presence within the Democratic coalition.

Liberal Republicans held out a little bit longer.

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I mean, you know, really, I would say that kind of this is the end with Charlie Baker exiting, Larry Hogan exiting, that kind of thing.

But the thing that I think is interesting about that is that those elections, I think, happened for a lot of different reasons.

You know, you look at the 2004 election in the context of the post-911 war effort era.

It was just a real uphill battle for John Kerry.

It would have been, I think, very tough for him to pull off a victory in that timeline.

But then you saw the country and I think including a large portion of Republicans sour on the war effort, you know,

and that led to the 2006 Democratic uprising.

Unfortunately, a couple of things happened in the space of the sort of 2008 to 2016 period that prevented any kind of reconsideration of those policy points of view.

And here's the way I would put it.

In John McCain, you have someone who gets the nomination based on his support of what was at the time a successful policy, namely the surge.

But the thing that I think really happened is because McCain was not associated with the Bush administration,

clearly someone who had worked at odds with them in many cases, and then because Mitt Romney was not associated with them.

And then because in 2016, you had gone through this kind of four-year period where a lot of people had shifted on foreign policy.

There were a lot of people who would say that they were always against the war, but even if they weren't,

a lot of people said, you know, we needed to have more humility about this

and they were tired of the war efforts overseas and they had seen the experience in their own communities of people coming home.

When Jeb Bush started to run and he didn't have really an answer on Iraq,

to me, that was just such an eye-opening thing because the consensus was sort of, you know, Republicans,

therefore, strong American foreign policy overseas, quote, unquote,

which effectively from the perspective of Washington means lots of military bases, a big footprint, etc.

And they really had never run into the idea that there were a lot of people, including people within the Republican coalition, who were opposed to that.

They thought of them as being the Ron Paul Freaks and not people who were essentially, you know, a third of the coalition.

I think the other thing is Bush ran on being, you know, an education president.

The backlash to No Child Left Behind is something that I think it's underrated as an issue.

There's a lot of people within the Tea Party movement in particular who were strong critics of that.

They didn't like what it did in terms of federalizing of a lot of different educational systems.

They viewed it with a lot of suspicion and they didn't trust it.

And I think that one of the things that happened because of that is there's just this kind of gap in terms of what people are saying in their communities and what the Republican bullet points, their

standard bullet points are.

And I think you see a lot of that, frankly, in this moment within how out of touch someone like Mike Pence seems with the times.

It's not just about January 6th for Republican voters.

He sounds like someone who basically hasn't changed since he was a member of Congress, you know, within the Freedom Caucus, you know, viewed as like a bomb thrower, viewed as being someone who would give leadership fits back in the day that is a bit revisionist. He's way too polite to give anybody fits.

But it's one of these things where that type of conservatism was viewed as extreme when there was a much bigger swath of people who were well to the right of that and who felt like their views were not being heard and found a vehicle for it in 2016 that surprised a lot of us.

So you've written that the arrival of the Trumpian moment in 2016 appeared to be a golden opportunity to dissatisfied conservatives.

Basically, if you didn't like what was going on, you hoped that the post-Trump GOP could become the vehicle for, as you write, whatever it was you'd always wanted.

And, you know, I wrote about this in 2017 for National Review in which I argued that Trump was like a tabula rasa upon which you could project your greatest dreams or your biggest fears.

He could be a best friend to evangelicals or he would love LGBT people or he was going to be a dove or he was going to bomb the shit out of everybody or he was going to like launch the fourth Reich, whatever it was, and he would just tell you yes and.

Yes.

So where were you in 2016?

What I was disappointed by in 2016 is that, you know, my friend Tim Carney and I, we did a debate with Brett Stevens and with Jennifer Rubin for then Intelligence Squared, the debate program in New York City after Trump had won the nomination.

And we won a debate based on the argument that you should blame the elites for the rise of Trump and we were in the four and they were in the against.

The reason that we won that is because we advance an argument.

One which I still believe in that basically says the political elite in this country got way too far out of touch and frankly had been credentialed to a point where they were no longer responsive or in touch with the priorities of the people on a number of different fronts.

And that allowed someone like Trump to come along and seize hold of those dreams that you're talking about.

Those nostalgic dreams that Yvonne Levin has written about in his books and others have noted as well.

This sort of boomer nostalgia for a country that to a certain degree existed but also had a lot of defects to it that they don't seem to remember at all.

You know, they look back on it with these kind of rose colored glasses.

The thing that I really was about at that point was I hoped that we would have a generational shift. I hope that one of the younger members really just someone who was no longer in that boomer category emerge as a leader.

I wasn't a particular fan of Marco Rubio, but I just thought that any of these guys really who has a

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younger set of priorities is more in touch with people who will still be around 30 and 40 years from now.

As opposed to being yet one more president who was born in 1946, keeping in mind that we've now had three.

That was something that really was a priority for me.

I hope that it would be someone who could channel this populism in a healthy way because I think there's unhealthy and healthy versions of populism.

But that was really my priority.

I mean, I don't as a general rule, I don't endorse and the last Republican that I voted for for president was John McCain.

So I've not been in that and I'm more in the analysis lane of things.

I mean, I was curious about the argument about how Trump represented a pushback against elites. One on the micro level because Trump to me is an elite doing kind of like a weird impersonation of what he thinks non elites would be like.

I think that the conversation he had, I think it was 2016 with Chris Matthews in which he's asked about abortion.

He's like, yeah, women who have abortions should be punished, which is exactly what you would think social conservatives would want if you have never met social conservatives or haven't really thought about it that much.

And then, you know, you get Susan B. Anthony having to come out being like, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa.

Well, it's the Mitt Romney severe conservatism thing, but on a much bigger level.

This is what you want me to say.

Yeah, it's performed.

But we see that Trump and people who have attempted to interpret Trumpism in their own way, which we'll get to that because I'm always interested in what that actually means.

They've lost a lot.

He lost the popular vote in 2016, a thing that did take place.

And, you know, about 75,000 votes in the three states change this entire conversation in a fascinating way.

Republicans get destroyed in the 2018 midterms.

He lost the 2020 election.

Republicans underperformed in 2022.

Any election that becomes about him, people are like, absolutely not.

He is a voice for people who want to challenge elites.

But then a lot of people really, really hate him.

How do you think that works?

Well, I think they hate him because of who he is.

For instance, a good example of this, I think, would be to say, you know, when it comes to immigration policy or something like that,

is there a difference between Donald Trump and Kevin McCarthy?

How different are the policies that he has toward trade?

At the same time, they're not saying that every country in the world other than America is a shithole

country.

You know, essentially, particularly ones that have lots of people who are differently colored than him.

But the thing that I think is true here is that a lot of this kind of Trumpism without Trump idea is based on the assumption that a different perspective on things was really needed in terms of the way that Republicans responded to their base.

And I do believe that that's true.

I think that you've seen the shift that's happened and the language that Republicans, even Republicans who've been around for a long time, have used on a lot of these issues, has shifted in priorities.

I think a biggest sort of aspect of this that's apparent is Republicans are no longer automatically assuming that big business is their friend, or that they should defend that automatically, or that those priorities line up with what their voters want.

But the flip side of that is this sort of question of how much of Trump's appeal is the non-policy portion of what he does.

And I think that that is both something that has enormous support on the American right and enormous hatred from the independent and the Democratic voter in a way that we haven't seen historically.

And I do mean hatred because he says things that drive people crazy.

He says things that are both racist and infuriating and insulting in ways that people, I think, properly respond to as just being anathema.

They don't want it.

And the thing to me that I think coming out of 2022 and sort of seeing, OK, this is the first election where he's not effectively on the ballot.

Because even though that midterm was a midterm, you know, it was about Trump.

In 2022, Democrats turn it into a conversation successfully about January 6th and about anti-democratic small D Republicans about these wackadoo,

you know, folks who are denying elections and like in the aftermath of those elections, virtually none of those people actually denied them except for the people in the state of Arizona.

And I think that that sort of proved to a certain point that the lack of normalcy, the lack of stability among these politicians was something that really damaged them.

They took an election that should have been about from the Republican perspective about crime rise in major cities, about inflation, about pocketbook issues, kitchen table issues, about education and the like.

And they turned it into an election that was about these people are going to seize your government and your democracy away from you.

And you need to guard against that.

And they did so successfully in part because a lot of Democrat money went to helping nominate a lot of crazy people in primaries.

And then a lot of crazy people just got nominated on their own.

You know, at the end of the day, what that proves is that people don't like crazy in their politics.

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You know, Donald Trump got lucky in 2016 by running against someone who turned out to be way more unpopular than I think anybody really assessed.

And by shooting the moon in terms of the electoral college, that's a very difficult thing to do.

The math and the map are even harder for him in 2024.

But I think the answer I would give you is the crazy and put just sort of everything under that.

So I have a theory.

I'm going to lay it out for you, which is that Republicans saw what Trump did.

And we're like, we don't trust or like this person, but he can be a vehicle for what we want to do if we just keep him happy.

But we are absolutely terrified of the fact that his voters have indicated that all of our conservative priorities,

everything that we've run up the flagpole with Heritage Foundation or Club for Growth, they don't care about any of that.

And I would argue in some ways that with Governor Ron DeSantis, they have someone who I think they believe can thread the needle of being both Trumpian,

not Trumpian in policy, not he's not moderate on entitlement reform.

If you go back to his stint in Congress, you know, this is someone who said,

we should embrace then Speaker Paul Ryan's plans on cutting Social Security and cutting entitlements, which Trump now is going after him for.

But this is someone who is a actual severe conservative.

But he is Trumpian in that he is willing to be combative all the time on everything.

Why do you think that's how this has worked?

Do you think the establishment is still afraid of like moderation on actual policy?

Because it's a different thing.

You can be, I think what a lot of Republicans seem to want is they want like national review conservatism policy, but then Breitbart conservatism attitude.

I'm going to disagree with you a bit.

And let me see if I can address all the different things you brought up there, because I think I understand what you're saying.

I would first say that true fiscal conservatism has no home in Washington.

I think it was tried.

I mean, I think you had, you know, in terms of Paul Ryan's entitlement programs, which were voted for overwhelmingly by Republicans, the vast majority of whom were reelected and very few of whom really suffered politically for it.

I think that that was, you know, an attempt to try to have reform of entitlements that was built along the idea that people are living a lot longer than they used to.

And that we can't offer people the same guarantees that we did back in the late sixties.

But I think that one of the things that is true today is that if you went looking for fiscal conservatism, you would find that in the Senate, you can count them on one hand.

And in the house, they are primarily the people who are on Kevin McCarthy's right, who are lobbing grenades at him.

I mean, Chip Roy is one of the most fiscally conservative members of the Congress.

So is Thomas Massey, and they are pretty lonely in there in terms of wanting to spend far less money

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and in opposing, obviously, for instance, this most recent debt deal as much as they could.

Heritage was with them on that point, which supports your argument.

But I think that fiscal conservatism post the Bush years got a lot of lip service from Republicans.

It got a handful of Paul Ryan things that he got through.

And that was really it.

These are two parties arguing about, you know, my friend Michael Malus talks about this as conservatism being left governing a speed limit.

And I think that that, you know, really is true of a lot of these fiscal matters to your point about wanting not that different economic policy, but with that different flavor.

I think that's a big part of the challenge for someone like DeSantis.

Because one thing that Trump has done so far already is kind of go after him for going after Disney and doing some of the other things that he's done as being anti-Republican.

That sounds like a typical Republican critique.

It sounds like something that Mitch McConnell would agree with.

And then at the same time, I think that you see, you know, within sort of DeSantis's approach, about a year ago, he did this thing.

He presented this permanent tax exemption, sales tax exemption for all these different things related to childbirth.

So that's diapers, cribs, strollers, all these other things that, you know, he did a big photo op, but it was, you know, a major tax cut in Florida for that.

That's kind of more of a traditional Republican kind of issue.

But that's not the reason that people get excited about him or that's not what he's known for on a national level.

It's what I liked about him.

You know, it's like the idea that we should make having kids a lot cheaper and easier to do.

And I'm one of the people who thinks that childbirth in America should be essentially free and that we have a big problem when it comes to childbirth in America,

given the difference in terms of survival rates, both for mothers and children.

But that's a completely different argument.

But the thing that I think is sort of interesting about that is that is not the thing that gets you a million hits.

What gets you a million hits is when you are yelling at a protester or a member of the media who's asked you a question that is at odds with your perspective and the perspective of your voters.

And that's something that, from my perspective, has carried through since 94.

It's really almost, I mean, Steve Kornacki did this phenomenal series.

I encourage people to check it out that essentially adapts a portion of one of his books and is on the Gingrich Revolution.

But what you see with his rise is this different use of media and this confrontational attitude towards media that had not historically been an element of Republican politics and then became one.

And carried through even to his 2012 run, you know, that incident in South Carolina that ultimately led to him winning that primary where he, you know, is taking on CNN, you know, sort of direct.

It's something that I think now stirs emotions and it, you know, hits that lizard brain part of Republican voters or some Republican voters say, yeah, yeah, hit back, you know, hit back.

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From my perspective, it's like, okay, well, but hit back intelligently, embrace the argument. Don't just say you're another one of these corrupt media journalists.

Why are you asking me this question?

I think debating the question is very important and doing so in a way that isn't just kind of the Ted Cruz debate school way, but of one that's designed to convince the people watching, not the person necessarily that you're arguing with.

Convince the people watching that you actually have a point and that they might actually be able to vote for a Republican.

I just think that's smart politics.

It's something that, you know, Bill Clinton was incredibly good at and really ever since he was around, we haven't really seen that type of skill.

Right.

Because I think that, you know, just fighting with journalists, I think about it in terms of pro wrestling, like it's cheap heat.

Yes.

It's the same thing as like going out in 1989 and waving in a rocky flag and talking about how great Saddam Hussein is at a wrestling event in Texas.

Like everybody's gonna boo.

You're the heel.

This is easy.

Yeah.

Last month, Tucker Carlson interviewed six presidential candidates at the Iowa's Family Leader Summit.

So you had Ron DeSantis, Tim Scott, Issa Hutchinson, Mike Pence, Nikki Haley, Vivek Ramaswamy. And notably, Donald Trump did not attend.

You talked about, and a piece that back in 2015, the Iowa Family Leader event was a game changer because Donald Trump could insult John McCain's status as a prisoner of war and get away with it. And people would be like, oh, that's interesting.

And this time Donald Trump didn't even show up and didn't seem to need to.

Can you tell me a little bit about that?

So I'm not sure that Donald Trump wanted to share a stage with Tucker.

No.

In part because I think Tucker would ask him tougher questions than people might expect, but also because Tucker is smarter and more appealing and more charismatic.

So, you know, you never really want to run the danger that they end up liking him more than they like you.

Why isn't this guy running?

So the thing that is bizarre about that Family Leader event, for a number of reasons, is it used to be kind of a space where you had to check the Iowa Bonafide days.

You had to go in there and say things that appealed to these pastors, appealed to their Christian and social conservative priorities.

And if you look back historically, Bob Vander Plaas, who runs this, and he's an often failed Gubernatorial candidate, but he's viewed as a kingmaker because the person he endorses wins all

the time.

Go back to Mike Huckabee upsetting Mitt Romney in 2008, which sort of let the air out of that sort of situation.

One of the things that stuck out to me about that event, other than the fact that Tucker was more interested, I think, in doing kind of a version of his show interrogations than anything else is.

It was weird to me that he didn't ask Nikki Haley about Ukraine because she seemed to be the one person I would definitely want to know what she thinks about it, given her foreign policy background.

But I also felt like this is how much the populist strain of the party now feels that it includes the overwhelming majority of evangelicals and Christians within the party.

There are certainly people who are outside of that, but I think that you basically do find that total in the addition of Mike Pence and Tim Scott, and that's basically it.

And so that means 10, 12 percent of the party that just is still so put off by Donald Trump.

And I would guess, excuse more female than sort of the rest of it.

I found that to be an interesting event, but it's also one of these things where I think that the reason that Trump really didn't show up other than that dynamic is that he knows pretty well that Iowa didn't treat him that great last time around, that Ted Cruz was able to pull off the upset.

And I think there is some part of Trump that is almost willing to concede Iowa, not to say that he doesn't want to win it.

He doesn't want to win it.

But he kind of knows, hey, I won the nomination last time without Iowa.

Ron DeSantis has built his entire campaign on winning in Iowa.

He hired Jeff Rowe, who won in Iowa last time.

He's hired all these people.

He's clearly palling around the state with Kim Reynolds, the governor, popular governor, trying to get an endorsement.

And I think that Trump is kind of looking at this map, or at least I assume that his people are looking at this map and saying, hey, look, sir, you actually don't need Iowa.

Iowa is not picking the president for quite some time.

And I think that part of that could have been the element of it.

So there are two things happening here.

You have a host of candidates who are all saying like it's time to move past Trump.

They cannot say that Trump is bad unless you're Chris Christie, who does not care.

But you kind of have to say that Trump is great.

But like, you know, we need somebody else.

We need somebody to get us over the hump, so to speak.

But what would it take even arguing like, oh, he loses.

Like it doesn't work or saying like, here's Ron DeSantis, who is like Trump, but he's done all the stuff.

You know, he has it doesn't work.

So what would.

So as Ric Flair, you know, would know to be the man, you have to beat the man.

DeSantis's theory of the case was obviously that I'm going to be Trump without the COVID mistakes.

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And I'm going to hammer him on that aspect of it.
You know, he's really gone after him whenever he sort of teed up something from Trump criticizing him.
He'll go and run through the litany of, you know, he was the one giving awards to Anthony Fauci.
He's the one who shut down the economy.
He still won't criticize him personally, but he'll do all that stuff.
And he'll even say, I'm not going to criticize him personally.
I hate when people read the instructions off the side of the legal pad.
I mean, you know, the going back to the HW Bush, you know, message, I care moment when it comes to beating Trump.
The thing that you would, I think really have to do is to stand on a stage across from him and beat him in debates.
And I think that that is something that we haven't seen any Republican capable of doing.
People haven't known how to challenge him.
They haven't known how to take him on.
And one of the things to keep in mind, I think, is sometimes you just run into a buzz saw and whether that was Rubio and Christie in 2016,
whether it was Kamala and Tulsi in 2020, sometimes someone comes along who just has your number and they may not even elevate themselves,
but they can take you down a couple of notches.
But I also think that Trump starts with such a lead that it's hard to see that happening at this point.
I think it's very likely that he ends up being the nominee.
And I think it would take him losing and losing significantly, losing by more than he lost last time in order for people to turn away from him.
The other thing that I think is one aspect of this that we should respect or at least acknowledge politicians who are great at running for office,
not necessarily, you know, whether they're, you know, great in office or not, they do the thing for themselves.
They don't wait around for other people to do the thing for them.
It's something that I think is very true, for instance, of a number of different people looking back and sort of saying,
you know, Barack Obama didn't wait around for other people to help him beat Hillary.
He beat Hillary.
And when it came time for the Trump phenomenon to happen in 2016, there were a lot of people waiting around for someone else to take him down.
Someone else, I need someone else to hit him because I'm not going to hit him and I'm not going to hit Ben Carson.
And so I just need to concentrate my fire on this other person who I view as being in my lane.
I think you actually, you know, you have to take on the candidate themselves and win.
I still haven't seen that from anybody in this field.
And when it comes to someone like Christie, I just don't think he's actually running to be president.
This is just a vengeance campaign, which is fine.
It'll be entertaining.

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What would you most like to see from a post-Trump GOP?

What I would most like to see is a reworking of what an America-first economic and foreign policy looks like.

And by that, I mean a holistic kind of approach that says, what do we want America to look like 10, 20 years from now?

Well, we want people to be having more kids.

We don't want to have a situation where people are so depressed about the future that they don't have any optimism about that,

that their family formation is so expensive and it's so expensive for them to get what they want out of things.

Education, the quality ones are so expensive, they don't think they can afford it.

They're delaying family formation.

And frankly, as we look across societies, across the world, that's a sign of, you know, your economy and everything else entering into a downturn.

I think we have to care about the American family.

And then I think we have to care about American foreign policy in a way that really prioritizes what the most important things are.

From my perspective, that is hemming in and making it clear to a rising but very risk-involved Chinese leadership

that they cannot encroach within the Pacific in ways that would essentially allow them to become the leader of the world in so many different respects

to prevent America from being able to chart its own path and to assist our allies

and also, you know, frankly, to prevent us from being able to make it clear that if you mess around in violent and military ways towards other nations like Taiwan, there's going to be ramifications for you.

You know, in addition to that, as American first-born policy focus is, I think we have to have that kind of attitude when it comes to recognizing how much Mexico has become a failed state, particularly in the cartel dominance that we see in parts of the country.

And figuring out what needs to be done to address that problem, as opposed to just operating under this mythology that we can just throw a bunch of walls up and that will be the difference.

That targets both, I think, the negative effects of fentanyl on all our communities, but also, I think, a very real criminal human trafficking element,

which is disrupting cities not just, you know, in the Southwest but across America.

So to me, it's kind of like making these points, all of those overlap with certain concerns that Trump raised,

and I would say are the more consistent aspects of him over his lifetime.

You know, he's been on every position on every different front, but he's been a little more consistent on those.

Let's make those serious as opposed to just lip service.

So that is what you would like to see.

Do you think that that is what American voters would want to see?

Because, yes, American voters, American GOP primary voters, I think there was some polling that

came out saying, like, we want to hear more about the economy.

I think 51% wanted to hear more about the economy.

Foreign policy, to my eternal chagrin, is never something people generally want to vote about.

If you can tie it back to a domestic issue, people will be interested in.

But your policy ideas, how do you think voters writ large think about this?

Because sometimes when I have conversations with people about what they want to see from their parties,

it's sort of like how some Democrats and some folks on the left will always talk about how like, but when we pull it Medicare for all does so well.

And then you like look at the wording of the polling and you're like, I don't think that's quite how this is working.

So is this the kind of, you know, this might be what you want, but is this, do you think that this is what voters want?

So I'll push back with you slightly only on this front.

This is from a echelon insights poll recently.

Patrick Raffini, who's the head over there along with Kristen Solis.

Anderson was sharing this recently in the context of an argument with David Sacks, who's been big on the kind of, Republican voters want to pull out of Ukraine has been kind of his drumbeat.

There's not polling data supporting that.

And multiples of the top 10 on this mentioned China.

China security threats, China economic competition.

And just by anecdotal experience, when I go to obviously primarily conservative audiences that I've spoken to,

I hear very little about Ukraine.

And in fact, the last two times I've gotten questions about Ukraine,

it's been about, are we spending too much in Ukraine to keep us from being able to balance against China?

So I think that foreign policy as a general bucket, you're right.

China specifically, I think people are much more aware of it.

And I think that they're aware of it in part because there's just been so much blatant behavior.

And then they sent a frickin balloon.

And it's like, I feel like once you give something imagery, like once you can actually see the thing, the boxes in Mar-a-Lago, like once you got that image, it's like you can't unsee that image.

And it's one of these things where that imagery, I think, made people just, it made them, especially for the boomer sort of sputnik kids, it made them feel very unnerved.

Yeah.

I think that on the point also about the economy is that in general,

I have found that when you talk to people about how the economy functions,

there's this general sense that like their personal economy is good, but the economy is bad.

Yes.

And voting on that, that is how people actually vote.

If I were in charge of everything, that's not how people would vote.

[Transcript] The Ezra Klein Show / A Conservative on How His Party Has Changed Since 2016

Well, one thing I think comes into that is actually something that happened in 2016. There was some interesting research done after that about the Trump voter not being someone who had personally experienced anything associated with like the deaths of despair.

Right, right.

Like it was in their community.

It wasn't them.

It wasn't them.

And so that's why like a lot of, you know, when there was kind of the pushback, first it was like, ah, like the Trump voter is sad.

Yes.

But then it was like the pushback was like, ah, they're making \$75,000 a year. Exactly, they're fine.

But then it's sort of the situation where it's like nobody broke into my office and nobody broke into my shop, but they broke into the shop that's next to my barber that I see every week.

And it's one of these things where like that flows into the way people think about things.

Right.

It's the shoplifting trend.

Yeah.

The shoplifting trend is something that is clearly a problem in America. There's a lot of evidence for that.

It's not just a problem in San Francisco or something like that.

It's not just a, you know, leftist city sort of thing.

It is a problem.

How many people are actually going to get shoplifted?

You know, not that many.

But if the place that you frequent, if you change the CVS that you go to or the Walgreens that you go to or the Dwayne Reed that you go to, because that one, you know, is more likely to have somebody running out of it when you go in carrying a bunch of stuff.

That affects the way that you think about the way things are going in your community.

And I think that that element is very true within the economy as well.

There are so many different strains within the conservative movement.

Can you briefly describe what barstool conservatism is?

So it's a term that was used because of its association with Dave Portnoy and Barstool Sports, the very successful online personality driven publication.

It has a ton of podcasts and gluing ones that I listened to that are off the wall and funny and entertaining.

But it came to be something that was associated with the rise of Donald Trump, because a lot of them were saying very positive things about him.

They were entertained by him.

But then when COVID really hit, it took off in a much bigger way.

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And so barstool conservatism became kind of this stand in term for a kind of libertine ish conservatism that really was about being left alone.
But also I would argue kind of an ethos of sex is good.
Me having sex is awesome.
Anyone telling me what to do in any way is bad and they should stop doing that.
But it's something that we've talked a little bit about of like these different strains working together and they found common cause I think during COVID.
COVID became a moment in which for many people on the right, this was the ultimate nanny state telling people what to do.
People were changing their Twitter user bios to do not comply.
And then later they were like, actually, we would like you to comply with this other stuff.
But like even describing the barstool conservatives as conservative is a weird thing to do.
And you saw that a little bit after Dobbs, you know, Dave Portnoy himself was like, emergency press conference.
This is terrible.
How dare we tell women what to do with their bodies?
And you saw a bunch of people in the right being like, wait, what?
No, it made sense.
But what do you think of these divides, these strains?
What does this relationship mean?
So the dynamic that you're identifying is real.
There is an anti nanny statism that can overlap from both a coherent conservatism and then just a meandering populism, which is essentially what I think the barstool element of it is.
We want to be able to gamble porn is good.
It's not bad.
You know, we want people to have fun, drink high noon, gamble more.
We want them to be entertained by the people who we have on our programs who are both big winners and big losers by cheap t-shirts.
And, you know, just keep the ethos rolling.
And where that interacts with politics, it really is kind of a celebration.
Obviously, Portnoy got to do a long interview with Donald Trump.
And historically, you can see kind of the appeal to that.
It's one of these things that is basically for people who don't consume politics on a regular basis.
It's when something goes viral that interacts with the political world, you know, where they interject.
Sam Talant, a very talented comedian from Colorado, described the pandemic as being a point where, you know, some people were getting very, very authoritarian about the mask and distancing and narking on people.
And then everybody else viewed their act of patriotism as saying, if I can't go to Buffalo Wild Wings, then I'm going to blow up a post office, which I think is very much sort of an accurate description of the two polls.
What I think of as being a good attribute of Barstool conservatism is essentially that it overlaps with the gas and flag kind of just leave us alone coalition.
Whether that be going after menthol cigarettes or vaping or, you know, any of these things that are

kind of nanny state government stuff that they rebel against.

I think that that's good.

And it's also something that historically is very American.

Barstool conservatives are the types of people who would have dressed up as Native Americans and thrown tea in Boston Harbor.

Like, Portnoy is that guy.

Like, you know, he's the Sam Adams type of sort of crazy man who is kind of on the extreme of that.

And then there's like the John Adams conservatism, which is I need to go in and defend the British soldiers in order to show that we have, you know, equal justice here in America.

And we're not just some backwards colony that's going to not be able to govern ourselves.

Those two forces overlap on some things, but they are at direct odds on others.

Right.

And how that is adjudicated, I think, requires those sides to talk to each other because Matt Walsh may want to, may be able to advocate for, I think.

And even make a strong case that pornography is bad.

It's done bad things to society.

It does bad things to men.

It does bad things to women.

You know, that kind of thing.

He can make that argument, but he's not going to ban it any more than he's going to ban VPNs or something like that.

Instead, I would argue he should work culturally to make more content that makes people feel a little bit more hesitant about consuming only fans or something like that.

Makes them give pause to, you know, going down that road.

If he thinks that's an argument that he can win.

But, you know, we're talking about elder millennials and younger exers here.

Like we're not talking about super young folks, but they are kind of this next generation of people who are going to be around for presumably a while and influencing what the right thinks presumably for a while.

When you're talking about those factions, what is interesting about them is how little they are represented in the diaspora of conservative organizations.

So there's a ton of little groups that are part of this kind of, we need to use the power of the state for the common good.

Those groups tend to be extremely small.

There's a lot of overlap in the benefactors.

They also overlap with media organizations in terms of nonprofit backing that they get.

And then you have kind of these big older entities of conservatism, Inc., which are back to a much, much larger degree.

I mean, you're talking about entities like the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute and AEI that were, for quite a long while, the big three in Washington, viewed as enormously important.

And yet went through periods of decline for a number of different reasons.

And so what you really have here, I think, is a bunch of people who have made their different little think tanks and made their different little journals and are all arguing with each other or giving each

other awards,
but haven't really coalesced into something that seemed to have some real staying power to it and don't have a strong level of representation on Capitol Hill to really be able to maybe move the ball in the ways that they thought they would be able to.
I think it's going to take some time to see how that develops.
You wrote a piece that was in praise of the single cat lady.
You were arguing in recent years, Republican candidates and media figures have become increasingly critical of one portion of the population.
That is single women.
And you see this continuum.
You see that, like, I read a piece, I think, the two weeks ago in which it was argued that single white women were the biggest enemy to the American right in the world.
Not like China or even like even something like amorphous.
It was like single women.
They are it.
They are the problem.
You wrote that it's the new Al Qaeda.
Right.
Exactly.
Exactly.
And you wrote like it's honestly a bizarre approach to people who purportedly want to be successful at politics, but you do see repeatedly this idea that the broiest people in the world.
And I do not mean broy in the like my beloved bros who with whom I discuss football and the second world war and like action movies.
I mean the people who think Andrew Tate is great and that feminism is why women are ugly now.
And you reference it in the piece of like representative Matt Gates talking about like women who are protesting outside the Supreme Court are just so sad and lonely.
Why would they even need abortions because no one wants to have sex with them.
They're alone with their cats.
One, this goes to this idea, you know, talking about wanting to seem relatable or normal, which I'm like, no, that's not relatable or normal.
But also like women have been defecting specifically single women.
Women have been defecting from the Republican Party for like 15 years now.
And there seems to be this ethos among some Republicans that's like, fine, go get out of here.
We hate you.
Well, and one thing that I would contrast that to is, you know, imagine if they had that attitude towards black male voters or something like that.
Republicans love the idea.
They're they're enthused about the idea of like if we can just win one or two more percentage points of black male voters, it makes us competitive in all these different districts.
They'll see this publicly, of course.
Yeah.
It's wild if you look at the voting percentages between like black men, Hispanic men, again, like

there were rising numbers of people who voted for Trump.

And I think that the polling showed that the number of black women who voted for Trump in Pennsylvania, I think you could put them in this room, which is not a big one.

So my response to that is always like, OK, well, first off, dream a little bigger.

But second off, why have this attitude towards the single women in particular that just says, basically, we're just going to write you off.

We're not interested in your vote, in part because I think that you need to be able to make your argument that the world that you envision and the cities that you envision in particular because so many single women in particular are drawn to cities

into that kind of environment, that that would be better for them than the current situation.

It's as simple as sort of saying, if you were a Republican, you know, running in some Democrat stronghold, let's just take Washington, D.C.

And you didn't try to make your case to single women by saying, I want you to feel safer walking home at night than you do right now under Mayor Bowser.

And that's going to be my top priority.

It's going to be crazy, you know, and yet that's the way that people approach it on a sort of national or federal level is they feel like they don't even have to make that appeal.

And I think that, you know, look, you're always going to get these same demographics when it comes to reliable Republican voters.

But I just think that this blaming of single cat ladies isn't just politically wrong, but I think it's at odds with what we should do just towards a group of people.

There are single female friends who many of whom own cats, many of whom would like to be married, many of whom would like to have kids, many of whom find city living to be far too expensive, far too dangerous.

They sort of throw their hands up after a couple of years and they move out into the suburbs or something like that.

Many of them are in a point in life where just by dint of bad fortune or financial crisis or something like that, you know, they went through a period where they never found a guy who seemed marriageable or some of them are sort of past that point and, you know, whether they wanted it or not.

I don't think that's something to blame them for when it comes to the policy side of things.

I think instead, you know, you should try to meet them where they are.

And even if you're going to, you're not going to agree with them on every policy.

Sure, it's going to be harder to win the vote of a single mom, you know, in the American experience than it is to win the vote of those sort of Republican, comfortable Republican demographics.

But I think you should try.

And I think that you shouldn't view them as being a form of the electorate that you should demonize in the way that so many different people within, I think, the right of center sphere tend to demonize them.

It's almost like you're taking glee at them living lives that are less happy than they would have been if they had followed your own prescription, but you don't know that that's true.

And, you know, I think that in the American experience, we should be all about helping Americans of all stripes, you know, pursue happiness as opposed to saying, haha, look at you.

[Transcript] The Ezra Klein Show / A Conservative on How His Party Has Changed Since 2016

You know, now you're barren and no one will take care of you when you're older and you'd have to live with your cat.

Haha, leave that to, you know, always sunny to make fun of, not you as a politician.

So what do you think the future of the Republican Party looks like in 2025 and going forward?

Like, do we just do this forever?

Are we chained to Donald Trump until he dies and afterwards?

I wish I could tell you no, but I don't think that that's, I don't see any way that he goes away after the selection.

As a potential presidential candidate, he could go away, but I don't think that this is a situation where, you know, his power is going to be dramatically diminished, in part because I think that just given the state of affairs on the Democratic side of the perspective, I don't think that he's going to end up losing by enough to make that happen.

The Republican Party has a rising new generation of people who are now in significant statewide positions and in the Senate.

And that includes people who are espousing Trumpian views in a lot of ways.

But I would say that it's distinct in the sense that they have a different priority set somehow than Trump and they are much more serious people.

And whether that's Josh Hawley or JD Vance, whether it's someone like Mark Wayne Mullen, who is certainly pro-Trump, but is, you know, has his own kind of priorities.

It's one of these things where I think you're going to see a group of members who similarly to what we've seen in the House are espousing a lot of things that are Trump influenced but adjacent or different or more serious.

The Republican Party 2025 and beyond, I think, though, is really put in a position where it has to decide whether it's going to try to appeal to the voters who they set aside in 2020, particularly suburban women and try to bring them back into the fold,

or whether they are going to continue this approach that basically says we can make up for losing them with a rising cohort of Hispanic Americans in particular.

But also, I would say, I think you're going to see the Asian American vote continue to trend Republican in ways that have been successfully executed by some Republicans, but certainly not to the level that they could nationally.

But yeah, I think that the idea in some people's minds that they can snap their fingers, you know, that it's pushing boots the last wish, you find that star and then you can just wish that Donald Trump would go away.

He's not going away.

And of course, you know, as much as he is as aged as all of the rest of them, he's going to go until he drops.

And that, and that's, I think, means that he's going to have influence over this party, regardless of what happens in 24.

So something that we like to do on the show is ask for book recommendations.

So Ben, do you have any book recommendations?

I have many book recommendations.

I'm not going to, it would be cheating, but what I will say is that this is a great summer to revisit or to introduce yourself to the entire pantheon of Cormac McCarthy.

[Transcript] The Ezra Klein Show / A Conservative on How His Party Has Changed Since 2016

Lots of people are familiar with the road, but people are not generally familiar, I think, with some of his other works.

And it's great to go back and read them after the author's passing.

But for three books for you, two from colleagues that I have at The Spectator.

The War on the West by Douglas Murray, I think, is an essential reading to understanding the perspective of conservatives, both in America and Britain, on the cultural battles that they see going on all around them.

That's, you know, just a couple years old, and Douglas is an excellent analyst, I think.

Lionel Shriver, also a colleague of mine at The Spectator, has a book that's a couple of years old.

It's a novel called The Mandibles, which is essentially a, imagine the Royal Tenant Bombs going through a deep financial crisis.

And it's very entertaining and trially witty.

And then I mentioned Sam Talent before.

I am currently listening to the audiobook version of his Running the Light novel, which is narrated by a series of prominent, mostly New York, but national level comedians who take on each chapter.

And it's hilarious and dark.

And I like to do this thing where I like am reading a fiction book and reading a nonfiction book and listening to a book at the same time so you can balance it between.

And so those are my three.

Awesome.

Well, Ben Dominic, thank you so much for joining me on The Ezra Klein Show.

Great to be with you.

This episode of The Ezra Klein Show was produced by Amapha Agawoo.

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Original music by Isaac Jones.

Audience strategy by Christina Samueluski and Shannon Busta.

The executive producer of New York Times Opinion Audio is Annie Rose Strasser.

And special thanks to Sonya Herrero.

The Ezra Klein Show was produced by Amapha Agawoo.