

[Transcript] The Ezra Klein Show / How Right-Wing Media Ate the Republican Party

I'm Ezra Klein, this is the Ezra Klein Show.

Let me state the question of this episode clearly.

What the hell has happened to the Republican Party?

When I began covering politics 20 years ago, the cliché was that Democrats were this barely organized collection of squabbling interest groups, barely a party.

But Republicans were this disciplined, ideological, unified political force.

Their majority leader at the time, Tom DeLay, he had the nickname The Hammer.

If that was ever true, it's not now.

Democrats have become a pretty organized party.

Their leadership transitions are orderly, they tend to fall in line, they nominate the next in line.

Republicans are a mess.

Watching Kevin McCarthy suffer through 14 failed votes to win the speakership, trading away his own power, his potential job security, and really crucially, the aura of influence and prestige that a speaker needs to be successful.

I mean, I'm no Kevin McCarthy fan, but even I felt bad for the guy.

And this was being inflicted on him by his own co-partisans.

It wasn't some plot Democrats executed against him.

The Republican tendency to obstruct, to sabotage, to throw sand in the gears, it is as powerful when they are in charge as whether in the minority.

Because look back over the past decade or so, it's not just Kevin McCarthy.

It's Paul Ryan and John Boehner, who both quit the job McCarthy now holds because it was so miserable.

It's the Tea Party knocking off Republican incumbent after Republican incumbent, including members of leadership like Eric Cantor, who is majority leader and is thought to be a future speaker.

It's Ted Cruz and the Freedom Caucus forcing government shutdowns or colleagues hated and opposed.

It's Donald Trump humiliating almost the entire Republican Party establishment, but winning the nomination anyway, proving that whatever the Republican Party now is, whatever the coalition now is, he understood it much better than the politicians who'd let it.

Republicans aren't a party anymore, they're a riot, a movement.

But they're one that is often at war with itself.

And that's not normal.

All political parties, they have internal dissent and conflict.

What is distinctive about Republicans in this era is they have lost control.

I date that to around 2010 with the rise of the Tea Party, but that's just a moment the dynamics of the party tipped out of balance.

It's not the moment those dynamics began.

So when did they begin?

And why?

Who profits from this version of the Republican Party?

Who perpetuates it?

Nicole Hammer is a historian at Vanderbilt who studies the Republican Party and she studies

it particularly through the lens of its media.

She's the author of two great books about conservative movement, *Messengers of the Right* and *Her New Unpartisans*, which I highly recommend, and she's a perfect person for this conversation.

This is always my email, Ezra Klein Show at nytimes.com.

Nicole Hammer, welcome to the show.

Thanks for having me, Ezra.

So something I was thinking about during the whole Kevin McCarthy Contra attempts was this old cliché that I used to hear when I started covering politics, which is Democrats fall in love, Republicans fall in line.

And there were a bunch of ideas like this, the old Will Rogers quote, I don't belong to an organized political party, I'm a Democrat.

There was this idea that Democrats were this fractious, barely held together coalition of interest groups, and Republicans were this more organized, cohesive, ideologically unified political party.

Let me begin with asking you as a historian, was that ever true?

I think it was true for a brief moment in time.

And even then it was only kind of true.

In part because the Republican party doesn't become more ideologically homogenous until you get really into the 1970s and 1980s.

In the Reagan era, you have this big landslide election time after time.

And you have Reagan pronouncing what he called at the time the 11th commandment that thou shall not attack other Republicans.

So there was this real sense of the party and the movement have come into power.

We have our chance, let's get on the same page.

And there were definitely folks who were disappointed with Reagan, who were further to the right than Reagan and were battling against him.

But their complaints tended to get kind of muted in that rosy glow of the Reagan era for the right.

But ever since then, it doesn't sound like a very accurate description of the Republican party, especially since we're talking about the House.

Ever since Republicans gained power in the House of Representatives for the first time in four decades when they come to power in 1995, there have been these fractious battles happening within the Republican conference between the leadership and the folks who are further to the right and see themselves as the most conservative and the most ideologically true, so that has been a pattern really for at least the last 25, 30 years.

So it might be time to retire some of those old sayings.

I want to zoom in on that period in 95 because I want to look at this way, this recurrent cycle of each new Republican majority or generation basically beheading the congressional leadership of the last one.

So when Republicans come to power in 95, when they take power in the House for the first time in many decades, they do so mostly in the leadership of Newt Gingrich who becomes Speaker.

But to get to that point, Newt Gingrich, among other things, leads an internal revolt against more old line House Republicans against his own president in George H. W. Bush.

Tell me a bit about Newt Gingrich's path to power.

Newt Gingrich is such a fascinating political figure.

He's actually a PhD in history.

He was a history professor in Georgia in the late 1970s and he runs for Congress and he's a back venture, right?

He's this guy from Georgia and he has his sights set on remaking the Republican Party.

He's just full of policy ideas and he's full of political tactics that he wants to roll out and he has his eye on power, which is an odd thing for a back venture and a party that has been in the minority for decades to aspire to, and yet he does.

And he sort of methodically makes his way up the ranks.

He builds the Conservative Opportunity Society and is associated with something called the GOPAC, the GOP Political Action Committee.

So he starts to build institutions within the Republican Party.

He helps to lead ethics charges against a very powerful Democrat in the late 1980s, Jim Wright, and manages to topple him so he gets a little bit of a political victory under his belt against the Democrats.

But then, as you note, his path to power from then on out is through Republicans.

He works very closely with the Bush administration on working on the 1990 budget deal.

This is the budget deal that is going to raise taxes and it is going to break Bush's read my lips, no new taxes pledge.

And at the very last minute, when Bush is going out to the Rose Garden to announce this budget plan, Gingrich, who is supposed to be out there with him, be part of this photo opportunity, veers off and goes to the cameras and attacks the plan.

And that really is the moment when you see that Gingrich is going to take on his own party in order to find a path to the speakership.

And that's a path that he ultimately manages to create by 1995.

So you're a, I guess I've already said you're a historian, but I want to ask you a metahistorical question here because I have read a dozen books about the great man of history theory of Newt Gingrich and how he puts American politics on an entirely new path.

And I'm always a little uncertain if I buy it in the sense that there have now been so many Newt Gingrich like figures that have risen to prominence in the Republican Party.

And there have been a number who tried this in the Democratic Party and basically got nowhere that one thing I often wonder is whether or not the Republican base was simply waiting for this figure.

And yes, Newt Gingrich was the one who appeared at that moment.

But if it wasn't him, it would have soon been someone else because this is what the party had become.

They were looking for these insurgent counter-establishment culture warlike figures.

I mean, Papua Canon is in the same era, Rush Limbaugh is in the same era.

And so as much as Newt has his singular dimensions, that the focus on him, the idea that it could have been that different, isn't really that true.

And you know that because repeatedly Republicans have found other figures like this going all

the way, of course, now to Donald Trump to support.

Gingrich was an innovator and he was somebody who showed a path forward for conservatives and Republicans who came after him.

But you were absolutely right that he was leaning into a moment.

Certainly Papua Canon's 1992 run showed that there was real discontent with the Republican establishment.

And that's actually important because if you're talking about, say, the 1960s and 1970s, there isn't much of a conservative establishment to be upset with in the Republican Party.

It really takes those massive victories by Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, all that institution building for think tanks in order for there to be a kind of robust conservative Republican establishment to push back against.

And Papua Canon pushes back against it.

Rush Limbaugh pushes back against it on his radio show.

He supports Papua Canon in the primaries in 1992, which makes him, elevates his reputation as a kingmaker and as somebody who is the voice of the base.

And that really is a moment when you're starting to see a distance between the conservative base and what it wants and these Republican presidents and Republican leaders.

And so Gingrich is absolutely reading the tea leaves in many ways.

We tell the story of Newt Gingrich as radicalizing the Republican Party, moving it to the right.

But that's a kind of flat picture of Newt Gingrich because he was also looking around and saying, it's not just Papua Canon, it's Ross Perot, who was the third party challenger in the 1992 and 96 elections and attracted a significant number of votes and reflected the sense that American voters were really frustrated with the system as it was.

And Gingrich compromises a lot on conservative ideology in order to try to attract some of those Perot voters into the Republican camp.

So he's a savvy political figure, but he's also kind of a bridge figure to the Tea Party Caucus and to some of the House Freedom Caucus that we see today.

1992 is so extraordinary to me.

It's one of these moments where the entire egg that is a Republican Party just seems to me to be hatching because you have Buchanan, you have Limba, you have Newt, you have Perot. But I want to go back to something you mentioned, which is this moment where Rush Limba endorses

Papua Canon, and the George H.W. Bush White House has a, I think, a fairly extraordinary response to that.

Can you talk through that story?

Absolutely.

So the Bush administration is looking out over the political landscape in 1992.

The threat from Papua Canon is much larger than they thought that it would be.

Buchanan, even though he loses the New Hampshire primary to Bush by like 16 points, he got a lot closer than any of the people in the Bush White House were comfortable with.

And as they were surveying the sources of Buchanan's popularity, they lit upon Rush Limba, who by 1991-92 was a juggernaut in right wing media.

He was something that no one had ever seen before.

He was making millions of dollars.

He had millions of listeners.

He was about to launch a new television show.

He had bestselling books.

He was this very singular figure, and nobody knew how much influence he might have on the conservative base.

But what the Bush administration knew was that Limba, like Buchanan, and Buchanan was doing better than expected, and so they needed to harness some of that Limba energy.

And so in order to do that, they tap the person who is going to be Limba's television producer and who has been a consultant to the Republican Party and to several Republican presidents, Roger Ailes.

And they invite Roger Ailes, who would later become one of the founders of Fox News.

They invite Roger Ailes and Rush Limba to the White House to have a night at the Kennedy Center with George and Barbara Bush to stay over at the Lincoln bedroom and really to court him, and there is this one moment that Rush Limba will talk about for the next 30 years, where President Bush picks up his bag and carries it in.

And in many ways, Limba latches on to that moment, not as Bush being this generous blue-blooded wasp from New England, but as the president carried my bags.

I have the power in this situation, the president waits on me, and that dynamic is going to define a lot of Limba's career, but also is pointing to some things that are shifting within the conservative movement and the Republican Party, where candidates and presidents are becoming more reliant on the conservative media systems that people like Rush Limba are building.

It makes me think of a legislative fight I covered in 2007, I think it was, where George W. Bush, George H. W. Bush's son, was pushing an immigration reform bill, and this was a priority for him.

It was part of him and Carl Roewe trying to build this enduring Republican majority.

It was a priority for the business wing of the Republican Party.

It was championed in the Senate by among others, John McCain, and I think the expectation, I think it's fair to say, in politics was that it was going to pass.

It was going to pass.

Then there is this massive revolt that emerges, and it is centered in talk radio.

There are these studies that come out later about just how much of its time conservative talk radio was spending on this bill.

Talk radio actually manages to turn enough Senate Republicans and House Republicans and Republican elites against a bill that it dies, this signature initiative of a Republican president is killed by the Republicans, not primarily by the Democrats.

I think you just begin to see this over and over again that Republican media, because in some ways, and we can get to this, it's a truer voice of the Republican grassroots than the Republican Party is, it can actually beat the Republican establishment, and it does.

Every time it does, it becomes more powerful and more able to do it again.

I can't think of very analogous examples on the left.

A lot of your work is on Republican media, so why is it so powerful vis-a-vis the Republican establishment?

It's a great question, because I think this is one of those codes that the left has been trying to crack for a long time now, because they see the power of conservative media to pull the party to the right, and they wonder why there isn't something equivalent on the left.

The answer is complicated.

In part, it is that from pretty much the very beginning of the Cold War conservative movement, so as early as the 1940s and 1950s, conservative activists were turning to media, whether it was publications like National Review or radio shows like the Manion Forum or the Dan Smoot Report, they were turning to media to affect political change.

They believed that messaging and ideology came packaged together, and if you could just get it in front of enough people through magazines, through radio, through television, that you would be able to build a sizable movement that could affect political change.

There's a history of conservatives building their own media, and of conservative Americans listening to conservative media as part of their conservative identity.

A lot of this happens because there's this very robust media criticism at the heart of the conservative movement, that the existing media, so whether it's New Yorker magazine or CBS News or what have you, the New York Times, that existing media aren't actually neutral and objective, that they're biased toward liberalism.

Since you're engaging and reading and listening to biased media, you should be listening to media that's biased towards conservatism because those are the right values.

That is important because by the time you get to the 1980s and 1990s, by the time you get to Rush Limbaugh, part of being a conservative in the United States really is consuming conservative media.

There's not an analogous movement like that or a way of thinking about politics and media on the left, certainly not among liberal Democrats.

That's part of the reason, and then these institutions, these media institutions, they're not just spreading messages, but also from pretty early on, they're getting involved in politics, so that idea that media and politics are intertwined not just on a messaging level, but really on an institutional and structural level is something that on the right has just, it now has, gosh, what, like a 70-year history?

That's a lot of institution building.

That's a lot of messaging and political identity building that there just isn't yet an equivalent of on the left.

I want to spend some real time here on the asymmetry and media structures because obviously it's something that I've experienced to some degree, and I want to give some credit to the right-wing view that there is, I don't exactly want to call it a bias, but there's a liberal acculturation in a lot of the media, that the people in major newsrooms are themselves much more liberal than they are conservative, and there's an integration in a funny way between what you might think of as a liberal media, an MSNBC or an American prospect, which is a small magazine I started out at, and mainstream media, MSNBC is part of NBC.

I know from having worked there that MSNBC is getting liberal in a way that NBC feels reflects badly on it, that the hammer comes down and people get very upset, and it becomes like a big internal political problem.

There's a way in which, of course, there is a liberalism, particularly a cultural liberalism

in the mainstream media, but there's also a restraint built around these business models and these organizations that at least have the self-conception of themselves as for everybody. The New York Times desperately wants to be a paper for everybody, NBC wants to be for everybody, and they have business models traditionally from these local geographic monopolies and airwave monopolies all the way up to these mass subscription operations that put this pressure to try to be palatable to virtually every kind of consumer, and that's become harder and harder and harder in recent years, but it is still a very, very present intention. Then as you go into the further reaches of liberal or left media, people who one day want to work at these organizations are somewhat restrained by knowing what it looks like to be in these organizations.

I say all that to serve up to you the counter question, which is conservative media because it isn't intertwined, with the exception maybe the Wall Street Journal, with these mainstream, more establishment organizations that have these business models that are about appealing to everybody, develops a very different business model that I think helps create a different ideology instead of practices, how would you describe the business incentives of conservative media?

I think that's right.

There's both a difference in terms of the professional practices, ideas like objectivity are professional practices that have continued on at places like NBC News or at the New York Times since the 1920s and 30s and 40s that are not necessarily the same constraints on conservative media, but the economic question is really important because in some ways, conservative media figured out the media landscape and the shifts that were happening in the business of media much better than some of these more mainstream institutions. That idea that if you have a devoted fraction of the potential viewing or listening audience, that that devotion means people are going to keep coming back, that they are going to trust the people who are speaking to them, so they're going to trust somebody like Rush Limbaugh.

They're going to buy the products that are sold during the advertisements.

You have this different conception of what it takes to make profitable media.

Rush Limbaugh is really an innovator in this front.

The conservative media that I was talking about earlier, like National Review, the SMOOT report, they had not cracked the business code.

It's not just about messaging to conservatives, but it is about offering a political message that seems like it is going to have a real effect on how elections turn out and how people govern while they are in office, and that triggers a set of emotions and attachments that make people fervent fans.

I think that's what's so important, and that's the thing that Rush Limbaugh figured out.

It's not just triggering the emotions of fear and anxiety and racial animus, although those are all in play, but it is also about being really funny and being really entertaining and drawing in those positive attachments as well.

Conservative media cracked that code a lot more quickly than left liberal media have.

As a result, they have not only built these very powerful institutions politically, Rush Limbaugh was able to go on air and say, I don't like what Mr. Newt is doing today, and maybe you all should call Congress and let them know how you feel.

That is a real muscle flex that Rush Limbaugh is able to do, and he's also able to make a tremendous amount of money off of it.

That idea of micro-targeting or understanding narrow casting that you want a small devoted audience and you can make a lot of money that way, the Wright figured that out much more quickly in part, as you noted, because they weren't necessarily constrained by those professional practices that a place like CBS News would have.

I think part of it is that they figured it out, and I wonder how much they were forced into it.

Something I think about here is about what attracts people to a media organization. When they come to you, what are they coming for?

In a lot of conservative media and some liberal media, they're really coming for the politics.

If you watch Fox News, if you listen to back in the day, Rush Limbaugh, maybe today Ben Shapiro, if you watch MSNBC, you're coming for the politics.

If that politics is conservative, that's really, really important.

If it's a liberal, it's really important.

Other kinds of media organizations, more mainstream organizations, I think something that often gets missed and is really important is that politics is one of the things they do, often not the main one, often definitely not the one that keeps people coming back.

Local newspapers, a sports section, and the classifieds were really, really important.

At the New York Times, how do you feel about our cooking content or recipes?

What do you think of Wordle?

It really matters.

That's a big part of the business, it's not the only thing.

The style section is important.

The book review is important.

These things that are really not in that way political, it's a reason I think the Wall Street Journal has always been a different kind of institution than a lot of what we think of as conservative media.

It is conservative in the sense that it is a place where you have more conservatives working.

It's owned now by Rupert Murdoch, but it's a business newspaper first, and so it has this other set of things it is doing before it gets into the question of its own politics.

NPR is another good example of this, where culturally, I think it's for to say it is liberal, but is what NPR is doing?

Is it first politics?

No, they're trying to be a news organization and have these local affiliates.

It's a bunch of other things.

So I wonder how much one of the things that has also happened here is that a lot of the space of these organizations that are cross-pressured in their missions, cross-pressured in the region, in their offerings, and so a little held back from going all in on politics.

Those organizations had taken up a lot of that room, and so as conservative media emerges, it is more explicitly conservative.

The market niche it is filling is not a counter-news or media establishment, but an unfilled political conservative niche.

It's such a smart observation, Ezra, because that's exactly right, the kinds of stories that make their way into conservative media.

They're not always about electoral politics, but kind of the hump that you have to get over to talk about a story on, say, Fox News, is that it has to have a politics to it, right? It has to fit into a broader narrative about politics, about the right about conservatism and culture, and that is something that is built into the missions of these outlets from the very beginning.

Whether you're looking at something like national review that comes out of this frustration with feeling that conservatives aren't well enough represented in the Republican Party or in institutions like universities, or if it's something like Fox News that even though it declared itself to be fair and balanced, was clearly trying to tap into a more conservative political market.

If that is your identity and your mission from the start, that it shapes why people come to you, but it also shapes the content that you put on.

If you stray too far from that, people might go with you a little bit if they are really attached to a particular host, so I think you're exactly right about looking at the mission and the purpose of these outlets in order to understand why they function so differently.

One recurrent story I seem to see play out in right wing media is that media outlets that are ultimately close to people in power, right, Sean Hannity is very friendly with Donald Trump, they're all friendly with George W. Bush, they will at times try to push the party or align with a party pushed towards the center.

I think a very famous period in this as after the 2012 election, when Republicans lose to Barack Obama, there's a decision clearly being made and argued at the Republican elite level that they need to moderate on immigration.

And so there is this big effort, the gang in the Senate emerges and they come up with this immigration bill, and Sean Hannity has Marco Rubio, who's now seen as a future leader of the party on to talk about it and Sean Hannity endorses immigration reform and the thing dies under another conservative revolt and Hannity eventually has to repudiate his own endorsement of that bill.

But I think you see it a bit in the very, I think, famous and dramatic first Republican debate at Fox News where it's pretty clear Fox News comes to deflate the Donald Trump balloon and Donald Trump goes to war with them and he wins.

I agree that conservative media often wants to mediate between these different wings where the Republican Party, but it seems in the end that they need the audience and the audience is this more ethno nationalist counter establishment base, which is not the elite level of the Republican Party and is often in somewhat contradiction to them, but is becoming through this whole era just more and more the audience with conservative media and is able to use conservative media and drag conservative media towards itself in a way that really increases its influence over the party.

Does that feel right to you?

Not only does it feel right, but it actually helps to counter, I think, a misconception that a lot of people have or a way we have of talking about right wing media.

This idea that Fox News pronounces or Rush Limbaugh pronounces and the right wing masses just follow along, that there's a kind of brainwashing that's happening or an influence

that only moves in one direction from right wing media to the base.

What that particular instance around immigration in 2013 points to, what the rise of Donald Trump points to, is that that's not the case at all.

In some ways, while it is absolutely the case that on the margins, there is influence that media outlets have that can help shape people's points of view on particular policies, particular directions that the party are going or particular candidates, that they need their viewers more than their viewers need them in a lot of ways, in part because viewers are often voters and so they have that sort of power and also because they can make their displeasure known by changing

the channel or turning the dial.

You actually see this in a pretty dramatic way after the 2020 election because Fox News calls Arizona and then ultimately calls the election correctly for Joe Biden.

There's a backlash from the base, from the audience of Fox News in which viewers went over to places like Newsmax and One American News, more far-right, more election denialist spaces in order to make their displeasure known.

That doesn't cause Fox News in that instance to reverse its call, but it does alert Fox News to the need to draw those people back in and to deliver content that will reassure viewers that they're actually on their side.

That dynamic is really important because I think we often point to right-wing media as being sort of anti-democratic and being this big institution that has muscled its way to the center of American politics and has unseemly power and those things may still be true, but the messaging and the policy preferences often reflect the preferences of voters and of the conservative base.

It's often the case that these outlets have to fall in line.

What's interesting now is that there is such a robust right-wing media ecosystem that people have choices.

Back in the 1980s and the 1990s, you really had a limited number of outlets.

Take the case of Fox News.

In 1996, they were pretty much it when it came to right-wing cable news outlets.

That's no longer the case.

That's why people were able to show their displeasure by going to Newsmax and going to One America News because they had more options.

That's another thing that has empowered the base in relationship to right-wing media over the past 10 or 15 years.

I'm Lulu Garcia Navarro, the host of First Person from New York Times Opinion.

On the show, I talk to all sorts of people about the experiences that shape their beliefs.

Some of my friends got shamed and called out in school board meetings.

You start wondering, oh, is this going to happen to me?

Others that can be polarizing, but the emotions behind them are central to understanding the world we live in.

Oh, yeah, I've had my concealed weapon and I've had a gun on me.

But now in my later age, switching over to a classroom, that's a whole new ball game.

I want to explore opinion in all of its complexity, and every opinion starts with a story.

I'm going to ask you this because this is like a very volatile period, and you decide

to become a politician.

I really want to understand how that happened.

What inspired you to run for office?

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So one theory of the Republican Party that I am interested in is that it has long had this contradiction at its heart between its money funder corporate Koch brothers class, which has built very, very powerful extra party institutions like Americans for Prosperity and Heritage Action and the American Legislative Exchange Council and so on.

And it wants things like the regulation, it wants tax cuts, it wants immigration reform, it wants pro-business policy, but it's also at some level fairly urban and cosmopolitan and educated.

It's not upset about the cultural direction of the country really.

It wants money or wants the ability to make money.

And then there's this ethno-national space, which is very upset about the cultural direction of the country.

Theta Scotchpole and Vanessa Williamson did a great study of the Tea Party years ago that really got at this, which is a lot of people wanted to say the Tea Party was there to create the Ryan budget and cut entitlements, but they didn't find that at all.

The Tea Party was upset about immigration, about changing racial dynamics, about secularization, about liberalization, about cosmopolitan.

And that top of the parties become more powerful.

They've gotten way more money because of changes in campaign finance reform and inequality and more organizational sophistication.

And so they've actually, or at least for much of the 2000s, pulled the Republican Party's economic policy well to the right, all the way the point that you have the Ryan budget, getting all this attention, cutting Medicaid and cutting Medicare and cutting Social Security at different points, which is not something that was very popular among the Republican base.

But as the Republican media organization gets stronger and as it becomes more competitive, this dynamic you just mentioned, and I think even more so as it then becomes attached to social media, which makes it even more responsive to what Republican activists and super posters are interested in online, that the Republican base, which has often had trouble speaking, becomes really, really loud.

And that one explanation for why the party at the middle has become weaker is that its top wing got stronger with money and organization, its internationalist wing got stronger through the media.

And it just doesn't have the power or the tools or really even the ideas that would effectively mediate between these two bases.

So they're always kind of at war with each other.

They ally for a while.

But then when you get to the agenda, when you get back into power, they quickly go back to a fighting mode.

What's so fascinating about that, because I do think that that's a pretty accurate description

of the changes and the tensions that have happened, particularly in the past 20 to 25 years in the Republican Party, is that it is both true that the Republican Party has moved further to the right, that it has shedded moderates, and certainly there are no more liberal Republicans to be found.

So it has become in some ways more ideologically cohesive, but it is still very much a coalition. And it is a coalition, again, because conservatism is such a capacious ideology that it supports both the Wall Street Journal opinion page and sites like Breitbart.

And those are, as we've seen more visibly in recent years, in constant conflict with one another.

And the base has found that not only are conservative media outlets a pretty powerful tool that they can wield, but also that they have real strength in primaries.

I mean, one of the places you see the tension between these two sides of the party play out have been in primaries since 2010, as the more ethno-nationalist wing of the party has really targeted more established figures.

And even though there have been real efforts to try to hold this coalition together, to try to get a little bit of what the party elites want, or the Koch brothers wing wants, and maybe those massive tax cuts that Donald Trump passes early on, you get something like Paul Ryan as the speaker of the House for the first two years of the Trump administration, which really is kind of the symbol of the balance or the coalition between these two parts of the movement and parts of the party.

But at the end of the day, where is Paul Ryan?

Even though he was quite young and seen as the policy wonk driving the Republican Party, he's not in Congress anymore.

He retired from his life as a member of Congress in 2019.

But there is this sense that there is just this coalition that is working things out and that in the past, I would say, 15 years or so, the base has found so many more tools.

You're right about social media as one of those tools.

You're right about conservative media as one of those tools.

I would add on that the ability to do fundraising with small dollar donations.

That has been a pretty empowering tool for parts of the right wing base to push back against those big Koch money donations and level the playing field a bit.

I think that last part is so important because there's a shorthand.

I was just using it, the money at the top and media at the bottom.

But media in online small donor fundraising world becomes money.

I think it is so telling that if you look at Open Secrets, which tracks money in politics, Marjorie Taylor Greene is one of the top 10 house fundraisers of the 2022 cycle.

And Marjorie Taylor Greene's colleagues hate her.

The Koch-Wingler Republican Party is not there for Marjorie Taylor Greene and her Jewish space lasers, but she is just a constant figure in right wing social media and media.

She has no super powerful committee assignments, nothing that would make her a fundraising juggernaut in like 1955.

But she actually is a fundraising juggernaut now, which in addition to meaning she has attention and helps define the Republican Party publicly and cause problems often for

it, she does have power because she has money.

And she doesn't rely on the party infrastructure in order to fundraise, in order to get her message out.

And so that really does weaken the party as an institution.

It doesn't have any real way to discipline her.

And back in the 1990s, when Newt Gingrich was the speaker of the house, there had been that long government shutdown.

At the time, it was the longest in U.S. history it spanned from the end of 1995 to early 1996.

And Gingrich, realizing he had lost public opinion that there was nothing more to be gained from having the government shut down, decides that he's going to make a deal to reopen the government.

And there is a group of Republicans to the right of Gingrich.

They call themselves the true believers, and they don't want to reopen the government.

They like it just fine that the government is shut down, and they think that the government shutdown should continue.

And the holdouts who don't move to help open the government back up, Gingrich had tools to try to discipline the people who were revolting against him.

Kevin McCarthy now can say, I'm not going to give you committee assignments, although he's taken a very different approach to dealing with it.

He traded away a bunch of them.

He couldn't say that to become speaker.

It's kind of amazing how weak of a position that he's in.

But he also just not only does he not have the tools to discipline folks, but he actually has to continuously give away the other power that he has in order just to become speaker.

So it's a remarkable change and a fairly short amount of time on the political scale.

Let me ask you then about what comes next.

Because I think there's a tendency when we try to tell the story of the modern Republican party to yada, yada, yada this part, right, this new Gingrich, and then he falls, and then it's John Boehner and Paul Ryan and Kevin McCarthy and Donald Trump.

But there's Dick Armie, who's majority leader.

And then there's the era of Tom DeLay in particular.

And Denny has to be a speaker, but is a less powerful figure than DeLay, I think it's fair to say.

And I think this is an era, this is an era in which I start covering politics professionally.

And I think this is part of why there was this belief that Republicans were much more disciplined.

Tom DeLay's nickname is the hammer.

There is this view that he can hold Republicans together on things Democrats simply can't hold together on.

There are these famous instances of unbelievable legislative arm twisting, like when they're trying to pass Medicare Part D and they hold the floor vote open forever, they end up with ethics complaints because of like how hard they squeeze people, which is seen at the time, I think as an example of DeLay's power and ruthlessness and Democrats would never do this.

And I think you can sort of in retrospect look at it differently and look at it as an example of how hard they had to fight to pass this bill that maybe had actually a lot of dissension around it.

But how do you understand the delay period and this period in which Republicans are seen as a more ruthless congressional force?

That period is really important as a transitional period.

And come out of the Gingrich era, which was to call it multuous, is to put it very gently.

Like it had been an era of tumult and there were real fractures in the Republican conference.

But there were also then new kind of rules put into place to help with cohesion.

The Hastert rule comes out of this era, this idea that we're not going to put anything on the floor that doesn't have a majority of Republicans support behind it, right?

We're working within our conference instead of compromising and working with Democrats.

So that kind of helps in a way.

And there are still ways to discipline members of the party, right?

The conservative media strength is still growing in that era.

It's still an era of transition.

Fox News had been on since 1996, but it was still kind of finding its way forward, finding its way to having a more substantial base for people to be able to access Fox News was still an early project in the early 2000s.

You start to see at the beginning of the 2000s the proliferation of talk radio voices.

That's when Sean Hannity gets his show, when Glenn Beck gets his show.

So there's a moment of ferment and the landscape is changing very quickly when it comes to media.

And I think we can't discount the cohering power of the September 11 attacks on the war on terror, that there also was this outside force that at least for a few years was holding the party together in more unity.

And that's not to discount Delay's power as a leader and his ability to sort of muscle people into doing the things that he wanted them to do.

But it is the context in which this is happening, particularly in the first four or five years of the 21st century, that there are these larger cultural and political forces that are helping people to fall in line in ways that they might not have in the 1990s.

And they certainly didn't after say 2007 or 2008 as George Bush is becoming more unpopular and that there's a lot of fracturing happening on the right.

I'm really glad you brought that up because I think there's another narrative here that is potentially very important that doesn't get looked at that much.

So there's a view, if you can see it in books like Gary Grissel's *The Rise and Fall of the Neo-Liberal Order*, which I think gives us real attention and I really recommend that book to people, that communism and the Soviet Union had a very important co-hearing force on the Republican Party in the entire New Deal and into sort of the neo-liberal era.

And it's in the interanum between the Soviet Union and 9-11 that you get this first real glimmer or exercising of I think what looks to me now like the modern Republican Party, right, the Newt Gingrich Republican Party that really sees government as its true primary enemy and to the point that it will shut it down.

This part of Grissel's point that when it has to worry about communism, Republicans

are actually held in place by being anti-government, but they also have a positive agenda for the government.

It's around defense, they are fighting this external enemy, so you can't be completely nihilistic about government.

The Soviet Union falls and you kind of can be.

Your enemies are liberals, your enemies are the government, your enemies are other establishment Republicans, rhinos.

And then 9-11 happens and that party disappears for a while again because you again have this more positive agenda.

There's something the Republican Party is trying to accomplish through government.

It's at war with the Al Qaeda and to some degree the way they put it, the Islamic world.

But then that threat fades by the mid-2000s or 2010s and the trends of the Gingrich era take hold again.

And you again get this, the enemy is liberals, the enemy is the government, the enemy is other Republicans.

How do you think about that?

It's something I've thought about a lot lately as I was trying to parse through the differences between a figure like Ronald Reagan and a figure like Newt Gingrich because in many ways they share a lot in common in shaping a conservative era in American politics and American government. But Reagan is also constrained by the Cold War.

He is a Cold War president and it's not just that he has to find those positive roles for government in places like military and things like that, but he uses a language of democracy and freedom that is very much shaped by defining the US against the Soviet Union and has real policy implications for Ronald Reagan.

He is pro-more open immigration because he believes that the free movement of peoples is part of the democratic system and what makes it better.

He is for free and open trade because he believes that the free movement of goods is part of democracy and part of what makes an open society.

And it is telling that in the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, you see a figure like Pat Buchanan emerge who does not feel that he needs to have those same peons to democracy that Ronald Reagan brought forward, who in fact is pretty skeptical of democracy as a system of government in a way that he couldn't necessarily have embraced so vocally during the Cold War.

It is no wonder that in the 1990s, you see the rise of a nativist anti-immigrant movement that is very contra the kinds of policies that Reagan was promoting in immigration reform.

And so there is something about the kind of disciplining or constraining effect of these big geopolitical battles.

And I think that that was important for somebody in shaping somebody like George W. Bush, who had kind of a more constrained view of the role of the US in the world when he was running for president in 2000 that looks very different after 9-11 when he has a more interventionist approach to foreign policy.

And so I do think that those bigger geopolitical dynamics are important.

What I wouldn't want people to take away from that, though, is that there is something particularly rosy or affirmative about having those kinds of dynamics, because of course there are enormous

costs to those dynamics as well, whether it's red-baiting and the red scare, or whether it is investigations and surveillance of Muslim Americans.

There's a real cost to that cohesion, because it involves having someone who is the enemy, and that often involves the idea that there is an enemy at home as well.

I agree with all that.

But I wonder if this need for an enemy ever goes away, because I think one of the implicit arguments here is that it doesn't.

It just turns inward when Republicans don't have a coherent enemy outward.

I wonder how much you buy this argument that is very common among political scientists.

You see it, for instance, in this book, *Asymmetric Politics* by Matt Grossman and David Hopkins.

The essential difference between the parties is that Democrats are a policy-demanding coalition. Democrats have things they want the government to do.

All these different coalitions or parts of the Democratic coalition, they're here to get something from the government.

And Republicans often don't.

They're a more ideological coalition.

They're more about values or more about a way they want the country to be.

And this is why I found Gersel's argument interesting, because he's saying that in times of this kind of foreign threat, Republicans actually develop a more coherent agenda of what they need from the government.

And then a lot of other domestic policies begin to make its way under that agenda.

We go back to the highways being built for national defense or the way that George W. Bush was able to get a lot of domestic work done under the post-911 unity and urgency. But without that, Republicans have a self-negating quality to them.

They're this anti-government party, increasingly an anti-establishment party.

So when they run the government and they are the establishment, those tendencies can't but turn on themselves.

And even worse, because the way the American government is constructed and you need a lot of bipartisan cooperation, if your enemy becomes the Democratic Party, I had Michael Brenner Doherty, a Republican or a conservative, I should say writer on a few months ago, when I asked him, what is a Republican Party, he said, well, it's not the Democratic Party.

If your enemy is a Democratic Party, but you often need to work with the Democratic Party to keep the government running, like for death ceilings or to get bills passed.

And yet your whole politics as a Democratic Party is the central threat to American life.

At some point, that just becomes irresolvable, like there's no way to act in a way that brings all that together.

Which is the crossroads that we're at at this moment, right?

This moment of both stasis and real danger that's growing out of that stasis and that kind of lockedness.

I do think that there is something to this idea that went in the face of a large geopolitical threat, that that creates much more space for, in particular, a president to act and to pressure members of the party that otherwise would not necessarily cohere as quickly.

This is not surprising that in states of emergency, there's just more room for presidents, part of the reason why we get so much innovation under Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal,

it's why we get so much innovation and institution building during the Cold War.

So I do think that that is right.

I would just want to emphasize a continuity, which is it's not as though the Republican Party pokes up its head in 1991, looks around and says, oh, no, we have no more enemies. We must go after the Democrats.

That anti-liberalism and anti-democratic party and that real and pretty fervent, disliked disdain for attacks on Democrats and liberals in the left, that is there throughout.

I think it becomes more visible and it becomes much more the driver of a much broader body of politics because the constraints of the need to address these larger international threats has been eased somewhat.

What's so remarkable about the Bush era is how quickly that all falls apart.

You have an event like 9-11 and you have all of this sort of bipartisan support for something like the War on Terror and yet by 2006, George W. Bush is ineffectual as a president and facing just repeated revolts from the base and it could be on things like his nomination of Harriet Meyers to the Supreme Court, it could be the immigration example that you mentioned earlier that part of the dynamic might be that when Americans are particularly concerned about these larger outside threats, that they rally around government and they rally around presidents in particular even more and that popularity is part of what gives those presidents and those politicians more room to maneuver as opposed to something else, that that popularity and public support is one of the big components and maybe the political structure through which or political realities through which their power drives.

I want to hold on the Bush era for a minute.

I think there's a narrative among liberals that when you think about the way the Republican Party began dissolving organizationally, not in terms of its power or its base, but its ability to control itself in roughly the 2010s.

I think with the rise of the Tea Party, that feels like a disruptive moment, a moment where transit had been there for a long time tipped into the dominant equilibrium.

I think liberals tend to date this around Barack Obama.

The election of the first black president drives a part of the Republican ethno-national space a little bit crazy.

I think this piece is largely true called White Threat in a Browning America.

Something I noticed when I talked to Republicans about this is they will tell that story more about the Bush era itself, rather than it being Barack Obama's election and maybe they don't want to confront some of the questions of why Barack Obama's election seemed to set this off, but that they understand the Bush era as a kind of trauma for the Republican base.

Matt Contanetti, who is at the weekly standard and launched the Free Beacon and recently wrote this History of the Right, called the Right, made this point to me that you really have to understand the Republican Party as there being a pre-financial crisis Republican Party and a post-financial crisis Republican Party, that the financial crisis did so much to discredit the Republican establishment to the base.

The tarp votes were occasioned such fury from Republicans.

I think you could also throw into that the Iraq War and that hangover, that there's a view and you see this a little bit in Donald Trump running so much against Jeb Bush and

the Bush family.

There's a view that Bush failed so completely that the tenuous hold the establishment had on the grassroots, the trust it had from them to the extent it had any, was lost in a way that it has never been and may never be able to be regained.

Do you buy that?

I do buy that.

I mean, I think that it is the case that the election of Barack Obama had a metastasizing effect on this discontent and this anti-establishment movement and the kind of, in many ways, the radicalization of the Republican base.

I think there's a lot of political science that underscores that belief.

At the same time, the crack-up in the party or at least the strengthening of anti-establishment forces in the party were there earlier.

You didn't always see it at the national level, sometimes it was kind of sub-Rosa.

So when McCain and a few other Arizona members of Congress were working in, say, 2003 or so on immigration reform, they would go home and they would be met by incredibly hostile constituents who did not want those reforms and that really backed them off of doing immigration reform until that second term of the Bush administration.

Again, the revolts that were happening against Bush, they weren't just about the housing crisis, although of course, TARP and those votes have a huge effect on the disaffection towards President Bush, but it was already there, the loss of the 2006 midterms, the corruption and all the scandals that the party was dealing with in 2005, 2006, the sense that Bush was just helping out his buddies and he was appointing kind of these people in positions that weren't like out there to defend conservatism, but were there because they were golf buddies or they were friends and so it was more of this kind of, you're not taking care of the movement, you're taking care of yourself and that's not what we want.

So that revolt was, I think, well underway in advance of the 2008 election. What the 2008 election does is it, in many ways, it displays not just on the, with the election of Barack Obama, but the splits between John McCain and his team who were running the presidential campaign for the Republicans and Sarah Palin. That is one of those points where the tensions between somebody who was seen as an outsider and an up and comer and somebody who was willing

to stand up to the establishment, actually face off with the establishment as she detailed her fights with the campaign team within the McCain ticket.

So I think that there's a lot you can see in advance of 2008 that suggests something much bigger was shifting and in fact suggests that the September 11 attacks and the kind of political cohesion that followed for the next few years disguised a lot of the ongoing changes and unhappinesses that were already in place.

I think that moment of McCain Palin is so interesting and it brings up this issue, which I think is really hidden by the singular way we talk about the Republican Party, the Republican base or Republican grassroots, as if it's unchanging over time. It brings up this issue of how the composition of the Republican Party changes in this era. So you have had over the past, you know, 20, 30 years, a real change in educational polarization in particular that Democratic Party is winning over in an accelerating way since Donald Trump, college educated whites who used to be an important backbone of the Republican Party, Democrats

are becoming much stronger in the suburbs, weaker and weaker and weaker in rural areas. And if you think about the Republican Party and frankly, the Democratic Party is always having pro establishment and anti establishment wings. One thing that seems to me to have happened is that the voters or Republican Party lost where the voters inclined towards the establishment and they've gone into the Democratic Party and I think made the Democratic Party a more pro establishment party than it used to be closer in some ways to big business, etc.

And the Republican Party is imported a lot of very, very anti establishment voters, voters who in many cases are the kind of, you know, Richard Hofstadter paranoid style in American politics voters. And so just the relative strength of the Republican electorate, how strong the people who believe in institutions are versus how strong the people who are really in politics because they hate institutions and feel they're corrupt and feel they should be mistrusted and burnt down. And that is their politics. It's not a kind of nihilism. It's a belief about the world that that's really easy to miss. But I think maybe the core of this story actually.

Right. And that there is, as part of that anti-institution, anti-establishment ethos, there really is an idea that you cannot broke any sort of compromise. And that's any sort of compromise with Democrats, of course, but really any sort of compromise even with Republican leaders and the Republican establishment. And you don't necessarily see that same dynamic occurring on within the Democratic Party, because the Democratic Party is having these same fights at the same time, right? Barack Obama is the less establishment candidate than Hillary Clinton in 2008, the fights between Bernie Sanders supporters and Clinton supporters in 2016, right? The same kind of dynamics are playing out, but there is a kind of reconciliation that happens in part because I think that in this is refers back to something you talked about earlier, there are bigger policy goals that are at play. And so you have the fights and then you fall back together in order to move forward toward those goals incrementally. And so in many ways, I guess kind of what you're seeing is a reverse of the line that you open this conversation with, which is Republicans fall in love and Democrats fall in line. And for the less establishment forces in the Democratic Party, they've been more willing to work with leadership, I think, than you have seen on the Republican side. And part of that is, as you're pointing out, that there really are just two very different groups. And in fact, you saw these two very different groups in the 20 or so anti McCarthy votes in the recent leadership fight, that there were actually two groups involved in that fight. One group was people like Lauren Boebert and Matt Gates, who just want nothing to do with Kevin McCarthy and whose political power and influence and identity derives from this idea that they will never work with the establishment even when they do. And then you had a group that was led by people like Chip Roy, who have certain policies and certain processes that they want put in place so that they can help to affect more conservative governance while Republicans are in power. And those are the people who were in constant negotiation with the McCarthy team and who ultimately were the ones who flipped their votes and voted for McCarthy as Speaker. So you could group those 20 together and just say, oh, that's just the more extreme part of the Republican Party right now. But there are actually two very different ideas about governance and about the establishment and about compromise that we're playing out even within that small group of dissenters.

I've been thinking about this and how much I buy it because, well, let me try another way of interpreting the two groups. And I'm not confident here. There's no doubt that Chip Roy is a much more substantive anti institutionalist than Matt Gates is. And Matt Gates is slavish towards Donald Trump and so on in a different way. Chip Roy had ideas and has ideas about how you can run the house in a way that will give Chip Roy and people like him more power to stop things from happening, more power to blow up processes, more power to throw sand in the gears of the machine. And he talks about it like that. And Matt Gates is more performative to the extent he is an anti institutionalist. It is about being one in public, not in private. I think he's talked about wanting to be the sort of conservative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. But Ocasio-Cortez wants government to do things. That is why she in the end tends to work with the Republican Party and vote on bills and tread altar bills and Matt Gates doesn't. And so I don't want to say there's no difference between a Gates and a Roy, but I think what unites them, which is really important, is that they don't want the government to do much. They're not there to achieve something. They're there much more to either express displeasure or actually be part of an action on stopping particularly Democrats, but often I think for them Republicans from achieving things. They were on board with enough in the Trump era that it's like the Republican Party is a very different beast in opposition than it is in the majority. And so you can get into a lot of the Talmudic questions about how deep these views run, but trusting that sincerity can change as your interests change. I do think there's something there that is still this desire to make the place not work as opposed to make it work. And those aren't really two sides of the same coin. They're very, very, very different.

That's a really excellent corrective because what are the things that Chip Roy was fighting for? He was fighting for more power to stop something like the passage of the omnibus bill that kept the government open and running. He was fighting for more power to be able to wreck the debt ceiling negotiations. So yes, he's kind of savvy. He understands better that you need to change the tools of the institution and the processes of the institution in order to do those things, whereas Maggots is just kind of dancing around trying to blow it up rhetorically. So I do think that that difference is less important than what unites them, which is the problem of having anti-government forces who are running the government is that ultimately you get what we have seen increasingly and repeatedly over the past 30 years or so, which are government shutdowns and crises over debt ceilings and sequestration and all of these maneuvers that work to make government less effective. And in fact, that underscores a broader political goal that most people now, I think, within the Republican Party, or at least the office holders within the Republican Party support, which is you shouldn't trust government, don't like government. Government is bad. And look, it can't do anything. And part of the reason it can't do anything is because we're making sure that it can't do anything. And that has been a pretty vicious cycle that the country has been caught up in for more than a generation now.

Why are Republican, I don't want to call it moderates, but less conservative figures so weak? So imagine another way all this plays out. You're on failed vote 11 for Kevin McCarthy. And I think the fact that Kevin McCarthy has won the speakership is basically disaster now. He is so weak. He has been proven so weak for he ever takes a gavel. The fact that he is not the guy is just obvious. And he is in a lineage of failed speakers now, like

Paul Ryan slinks away after just a couple of years. John Boehner quits whistling Zippity Duda, Eric Cantor, who was supposed to be the third member, along with McCarthy and Ryan of the Young Guns, who was considered the likely speaker of them all loses in a primary to Dave Brad. I mean, being speaker of a Republican House is just a disaster of a job at this point. And McCarthy is from everything we can tell looks like he's going to be the weakest of the crew. And the idea that it is this conservative rump, the Freedom Caucus controlling everything, it is repulsive to the 40 or 50 Republicans on the other side of the caucus. And they could have joined with Democrats or others to elect a Republican speaker who was more their kind, right? You know, bring Fred Upton of Michigan back or something. And they don't. They don't do anything. They just submit and submit and submit and then whine in the press and submit and then eventually lose elections because a party has gone so far right that their districts are no longer defensible. And I don't get it. I don't get why so many of these people are so weak. What it is about the character of the Freedom Caucus that will let them stand up and go to war for what they believe in. And yet the Republican center or, you know, for the left even than that has so little interest in trying to rest their chamber back from the people who've taken it from them and have weakened them. I mean, I think that at least part of it is they're pretty outnumbered, even if there are 40 or 50. And I agree that moderates isn't the right term, but that we also have a kind of poverty of political language at the moment, that people who just want to get on with things and actually get things done. First of all, they might not identify as a cohesive caucus within the Republican conference, right? They might not feel a kind of unity of purpose that the House Freedom Caucus does. They're certainly not being backstopped by powerful media voices in the same way that the House Freedom Caucus would be. And it's probably really difficult to raise a lot of money off of the idea of partnering with the Democrats to pick a speaker. And that sort of illustrates one of the boxes that Republicans are in at the moment, is that you are going to face many more political problems in teaming up with the Democrats than you are going all the way to the far right of the party and mucking up the operations of the House. Just where the media incentives are, where the base incentives are, there isn't a passionate middle for the right or for the Republican party. And so it makes it much more difficult to stick your neck out. And part of me also agrees with you, was like, what are you there for? Like, are you just there to continue to have power indefinitely until the process that you described happened, where you're finally forced out by a primary challenger from your right? Or are you there to actually do things? And if you're there to actually do things, you should probably get around to doing them and figure out the alliances and coalitions that you need to build to do the things that you were sent to Congress to do. There is very little political courage at the moment among that faction of the Republican party. And in part, they're being disciplined by what they saw, say, around the January 6th committee, right? The folks who stood up and said, you know what, morally, I cannot defend the insurrection at the Capitol. Morally, I think that we need to do something, whether it's serving on that committee or impeaching Donald Trump. Like, we have to do something. And the people who went with what they thought was the right thing to do, ultimately, it cost quite a number of them their jobs. And if you don't see an upside to it and you want to keep holding on to your position because you believe there are longer term goals that you can continue to work on, that could be

part of the dynamic. But now I'm just psychoanalyzing people because I also agree that it is, it's a little frustrating for people on power to just ride the tides and not actually do much of anything.

I think that's a fair psychoanalysis. And certainly the example of Liz Cheney or for that matter separately, you know, all of your colleagues who have been primaried over the years is going to be in everybody's head. It just seems to be as a matter of survival to say nothing of thriving, that at some point, the more mainstream part of the Republican caucus or conference would want to come up with something new. I mean, another way of looking at it is looking at Boehner and Ryan, who had a lot of power actually. I mean, Ryan is quite well liked by his colleagues, just miserable. And Boehner was a, you know, fairly capable speaker, not I think a historic man for the job in his time, but but knew the institution, you know, had support. And the thing that I noticed with Republicans, which is interesting and consistent now, is that they really don't even keep fighting their own pace. It's not like they typically fight and lose. Liz Cheney was interesting in that she actually ran and lost. But before you get to the Liz Cheney level of going toe to toe with the Republican Party and particularly the Donald Trump wing of the Republican Party, you could really fight with a Freedom Caucus and you could really be making other kinds of deals. You could be doing internal party warfare, you know, internal party factional maneuvering. And a lot of them just retire rather than trying, you know, Ryan's like that band was like that, you know, and then they'll send me speak their mind three years later in a Tim Alberta profile and political or something. And it's just very frustrating.

I don't think it's just not the history of party politics that parties stay the same way forever. But in the way that you did need people like New Cambridge to actually pick up on what was possible and organize against it, you do need people to try to create other realities and see if the the response is there. And they just don't they were all just so quiet in the McCarthy situation. I mean, they didn't come up with anything new they could do. They just, you know, McCarthy, who had submitted to everything and the submitting the even more and trading way even more power, they never came up with another play that could sideline these people they hate. Like, I think it's so important they hate these members of their own, their own party, and they do nothing about it.

That should motivate them very frustrating. Yes, I mean, that that that level of submissiveness or inaction is baffling. And it actually reminds me of this book that I, I've been reading Timothy Schenck's real liners, where he looks at the ways that parties and coalitions change over the course of American history. And he gets to the contemporary era and he looks around and he's like, we're sitting on a knife's edge, where parties are constantly trading power back and forth. Nobody can build lasting stable coalitions. You don't see things like the landslides of the 1980s or the 1970s or the 1960s or the 1930s. Like, where have all the landslide elections gone? Where has all the one party dominance that has defined most of American history? Where has that gone? Why can't people build these big stable coalitions anymore? And that is a question not only for the Republican Party, but it's actually a question for the Democratic Party as well. You can point to institution, you can point to structural changes, issues around voting and gerrymandering and all of that. But it is also the case that the Democratic Party does not have massive majorities like we saw in an earlier era that allowed for a kind of stability of government and for more coalition

building and for more horse trading and the kinds of things that would make for at least a functional politics, would at least move the country willfully in a particular direction. That's a spoiler. He doesn't necessarily have an answer for why that's not happening right now, but it does point to that we are in this moment of real aberration and the longer history of party politics and this kind of weak needness or this inability to do the kind of coalition building that has defined so much of American politics. That's an ingredient that is missing right now. And the politics that we see playing out not only in the Republican Party, but in the Republican and Democratic parties and in election after election is a consequence of that lack of a real solid realignment in politics.

I'm going to check that out. I love that recommendation. And I think that's actually a good bridge to our final question, which is what are three books you'd recommend to the audience?

Well, I have been reading so many really great history books lately, history books that are doing rich and innovative and deep work, but are also incredibly readable and accessible in a way that sometimes the most innovative work isn't. One that I would recommend is actually really well timed for the fact that we're at the beginning of a new year. People are thinking about hitting the gym again. It's a book called *Fit Nation, The Gains and Pains of America's Exercise Obsession* by Natalia Petrizella. And it's basically like this 100 year look at exercise in the United States. And one of the things that's so smart about what she looks at is she looks at the way that exercise becomes kind of this luxury good as there's a public disinvestment from parks and physical education and the kinds of things that would help everyone have access to fitness and to exercise. So I definitely want to recommend that there is a book that's not out yet, but it's coming out in May and it's brilliant. It's called *Dreamland, America's Immigration Lottery in an Age of Restriction* by Carly Goodman. And it's about this thing called the Diversity Lottery, which is a policy that the U.S. uses in order to allow people from underrepresented countries access to the United States. They might not have through skill visas or through family reunification visas. And it was originally created actually in the 1980s and 1990s because there were so many Irish immigrants coming to the United States without visas or falling out of status. So who were here without documentation and powerful figures like Ted Kennedy wanted to work to put these people back into status and bring more Irish immigrants over because there were more people who wanted to come than the quota allowed. And what ultimately ends up happening though is that this diversity lottery becomes a key for people from places like Ghana to come to the United States. And it builds this whole infrastructure of a kind of lottery for coming to the U.S. It's a fascinating story. It seems like it's about a small thing, but it's actually this big, beautiful, sprawling story about immigration in recent years. And then the third one that I want to recommend is Jefferson Cowey's *Freedom's Dominion*, a saga of white resistance to federal power. This is a book about white resistance to federal power. It's a big, huge, long story. But he roots it in one tiny place, Barber County, Alabama, which is actually the county that George Wallace is from. And he looks at how over the course of more than 150 years white people in Barber County resist all sorts of federal intervention in order to retain the freedom to oppress, whether that's the freedom to impress indigenous people or the freedom to oppress black people. He looks at how that plays out on the ground in this very small place. All three of these are just

gorgeously written books, really eye-opening. So I wanted to put them on everyone's radar. Nicole Hammer, thank you very much. Thank you so much.

The Ezra Klein Show is produced by Emma Fagawa and Yelvin Jeff Geld, Mirjai Karma and Kristin Lin. Fact-checking by Michelle Harris and Kate Sinclair. Original music by Isaac Jones, mixing by Jeff Geld, audience strategy by Shannon Busta. The executive producer of New York Times Opinion Audio is in here with Strasser. And special thanks to Pat McCusker and Kristina Sibylowski.