

[Transcript] The Ezra Klein Show / This Conservative Thinks America's Institutions 'Earned' Their Distrust

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, the mic is Jane Kostin.

She's a Times Opinion writer. She has done years of work covering modern Republicanism, conservatism, the populist right, and all of the schisms and fractures within.

It's a topic we've been trying to do more work on, so I was grateful.

She's willing to come on the show and do some conversations around it. Enjoy.

In 1964, 73% of Republicans said they trusted the federal government to do the right thing almost always or most of the time.

Today, that number is down to 9%. And it's not just the government.

You can see that same basic trend for the media, for public schools, for universities.

You can't understand the modern Republican Party without understanding this complete, collapsed, and trust in mainstream institutions.

Which is why I was interested in having a conversation with Mary Catherine Hamm.

Hamm is a fourth generation journalist and conservative writer who has appeared on CNN, Fox News, and ABC News.

And a core theme of her work is the way that American institutions, from the CDC, to the Department of Education, to the mainstream media, have failed again and again to serve Americans.

Hamm and I disagree on a lot.

I'm old enough to recall the events that led up to the Iraq War and old enough to have read a fair amount about FBI surveillance of dissidents

and the ways in which so-called objective reporters called LGBT people deviates.

So it is slightly amusing to me that Republicans have just now decided that the federal government is worthy of distrust.

But I think hers is a perspective that's worth hearing at.

First, because there's some real truth to it.

But also because it's a perspective that has become dominant on the American right today.

As always, you can email the show with your thoughts and guest recommendations at EzraKlineShow@nytimes.com.

Mary Catherine Hamm, welcome to the EzraKline Show.

Thank you so much for having me.

So you've written that this country so desperately needs a reliable narrator and every major institution and figure just refuses to be one.

That is the overall theme of a lot of your work, is a growing distrust or the state of distrust, largely from conservatives in American institutions.

Why do you think that's happened?

In large part because the institutions deserve it.

I am at heart, was raised an inkstained wretch.

I'm a fourth generation newspaper journalist.

My great grandfather started the illustrious newspaper in beautiful pits, Georgia.

And then his son was a writer for that paper.

And then my dad was a newspaper editor and now me.

And I worked in newspapers before they fell off a cliff in the mid 2000s.

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So my take on media is often, help me help you.

I want this to be better.

I want to have a fourth estate that is strong that people can believe.

And I feel like far too often and frankly during the COVID era in some pretty obviously disturbing ways, we got past sort of basic bias or not knowing what the other side believed and into actual suppression.

And that understandably makes people turned off, right?

That understandably is a trust issue.

And I've spoken about it for years that particularly in media, there's a lack of introspection.

Despite the fact that trust numbers are so low and we should be very concerned about that as an industry, there tends to be a tendency to put it on the audience.

Like, gosh, they're just not receiving us correctly.

And it's like, well, maybe we could think about some of the things that we've done that would make them not receive us well.

You've talked about the 2016 election as a turning point for you in terms of media trust.

I think every major publication published some sort of what happened, usually with like that headline and that kind of vocal effect.

538 did a version.

The Times did a version.

The Washington Post did a version.

Everybody did a, what did we do wrong?

What happened story?

But it's clear that that wasn't sufficient for you.

And I think for a lot of people, why?

Okay, so I do appreciate an attempt to piece this together.

And I think there were some attempts made.

They were sort of short-lived.

And I think after the attempt is made, there's people fall back into the habit of like, we're just going to see this the way we see it.

And the concern I had was not that Trump didn't do bad things.

I was opposed to him the entirety of 2016.

I'm on CNN talking about it, but it was that because you can imagine that this person you don't like did a terrible thing does not mean that we have the facts to support that.

And I don't want to get there.

And I also don't want to disrespect the people who voted for him and write them off, even though I didn't, because that's a large part of the country.

And it's a large part of the country that you need to have trust with.

The other thing about sort of calling elections and look, I have no pristine record in this case, but I do think when the entire industry gets something so wrong, which is seeing Donald Trump coming. Now, to be fair, Donald Trump didn't see himself winning.

I'm surprised to him.

However, I thought, man, it is a problem if we all put our TV dresses and our ties on the next day and tell everybody, well, here we are to just analyze again.

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Well, you just really, really messed up.

If you don't own up to that in that moment, I think people go, oh, great, they're just putting on their act again and they're not being trustworthy.

So I've always thought that the idea of quote unquote trusting media seems misplaced to me.

For one thing, I've noticed that a lot of the people who are like very angry at the New York Times still have New York Times bestselling writer in their Twitter bio.

There's really a sense of like, it's an authority when we want it to be and it's not an authority when we're mad at it.

For another thing, a lot of the people who will say that they distrust media, they trust somebody, should they?

To my mind, what I end up doing, and this is something that I think the former Twitter, the artist formerly known as Twitter, was actually good for is that when I joined Twitter many, many years ago, too many, you could cultivate this personally tailored stream of people you trust.

Now, that of course means on left and right that often you end up with a stream of people, people who agree with you.

I attempt very proactively to fill my feed with people I do not agree with.

I attempt to read their stuff in good faith and disagree in good faith.

I grew up in an all liberal town.

If I had not been able to disagree in good faith, my entire life I would have had no one to talk to.

And so that's an important part of how I think you can gain perspective on news.

I don't pick outlets.

I generally pick reporters or I pick commentators who I feel like are dealing with me on the facts, who will tell me stuff that is against perhaps the prevailing narrative because that takes some courage.

That to me is one of the parts of new media that is good and can be exhausting is that you are forming your own sort of newsroom personally and then to challenge yourself and make sure that newsroom is not everyone who agrees with you.

Because I say this all the time, I speak on college campuses as the one weirdo right-winger they invite and I say, be the weirdo in the room.

It's hard, but rooms need weirdos because they need their ideas tested.

And I attempt to have a little bit of backbone to occasionally be that weirdo.

Right.

There's been this constant discussion, you know, a lot of my work has focused on covering conservatism in the age of Trump.

And a lot of the criticism I've gotten is that either I am giving cover to the worst elements of some of American society by trying to make sense of it and trying to put it into some sort of conservative parlance or putting it into context.

Or I'm not being nice enough to very nice conservatives.

And this is how we got Trump, which I've always thought to be such a funny argument that like things were awful.

And that's why we had to get this guy we like, like that's not how that works.

But a lot of publications are thinking about how do you cover or to use the term platform, which actually kind of hate because that kind of implies that you are just like, you know, you pick

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somebody up and you're like, here you go.

Right.

I think that conservatives might remember in 2020, NPR did an interview with someone who wrote a book about how riots essentially were good.

And that riots were a good idea.

And this was this interview with this person who had written this book.

And I think some of the coverage of that book that I saw in right-leaning outlets was essentially, one, how dare this person write this book.

Two, how dare this person's book get covered in NPR.

And three, how dare this person's book and ideas get engaged with on NPR and any outlet.

And so I'm curious how you think about this problem of one, what does it even mean to platform?

Are we saying that this idea is good or bad, even if you get to see it?

Two, how do you engage with those ideas, some extreme ideas or extreme, again, take your pick of what that means with context and pushback while making it readable, perceivable.

How do you think about that?

Yeah.

On the platforming question, I'm in favor of just like really wide latitude on the ideas that adults can engage with.

Now, I think the argument on the NPR coverage of that book is that, okay, you have a book that's explicitly saying writing can be great.

And the idea that a similarly extreme take on the right would get similar coverage in the same outlet, I think is on its face obvious that that would not happen.

Right.

Right.

So I think a lot of it comes from that, like this is legitimized while we are pathologized.

You can engage with this stuff without maybe doing either of those things.

So I think like a wide latitude is good.

When it comes to platforming Trump, it's like, well, he's the, by a vast lead leading candidate for one of the major parties.

So I disagreed with the idea that Licht had gone wrong in having him in this town hall.

Chris Licht, former-

Chris Licht, formerly of CNN, had the Trump town hall.

The interlocutor was Caitlin Collins, put her up there, asked some tough questions.

Now, would I have done it slightly differently?

I think he was very brazen about, oh yeah, it is a super pro Trump crowd.

And I would have maybe had some more ground rules for that, which I think would have made it a better situation.

So some of it is just reading the room.

However, I think you can engage with plenty of ideas and critique them without denigrating entire parts of the population who might also be engaging with those ideas.

I also hate the idea on TV or Twitter or whatever it is.

This happened a lot during the Trump years.

If you engage in providing context and saying, okay, well, how big is this Trump offense?

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Let's compare it to things we've seen in the past.

That that is treated as Trump boosting.

I actually think the context is bringing us closer to understanding this issue than further away.

So I don't like the idea that engaging in walking through each of these things and not imagining your Trump narrative as opposed to really comparing it to history.

That that's off limits, that that makes you some kind of sell out because I think you're actually informing people.

So we've seen this conversation more recently with Democratic presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.

and his views generally centering on vaccines, but also ranging from believing that the Koch brothers should be sent to prison to something about COVID as a bio weapon.

I think that there have been a lot of good arguments about how his views are shared by some people and his views deserve to be heard and then contested.

But I'm curious as to your thoughts as to I wrote down crack pottery, which I've decided now I really like that as a noun.

But each of us, and I think we kind of have a general consensus as to the crack pottery.

We're like, we'll listen to this and the crack pottery.

We're like, no, this isn't acceptable out in our Holocaust denial, for example.

So in a country as broad as ours and with media whose incentives are there because it's grabby and interesting and the incentives to cover him,

especially for conservatives who don't like Joe Biden very much, very much there.

But I am interested in how you think about like anti-vaccine views we can engage with.

Holocaust denial can't engage with.

How do we think about whose crack pottery we listen to and engage with and again, challenge to be clear and whose are we like, nope, that's anathema?

I think it's sliding scale.

I would like the parameters to be like way out here on the left and right just because I'm pretty crackpotty myself on that, just on the idea of airing these things.

So I want the parameters to be wide.

I also think what RFK Jr. is tapping into, well, he's covered one because like he's a Kennedy and he's getting not a small amount of percentage.

In this non-primary race that's sort of happening under the radar, he's getting equivalent to many and more percentage points than many of the GOP contenders against Trump, right?

So I think that's interesting because there's a market that's being served here.

Now, a lot of coverage has attempted to sort of pin him on the right.

Like he's a man of the right.

I'm like, well, he's literally a Kennedy running in the Democratic primary.

So I'm not sure about that, but I think what people miss in trying to make him a man of the right is that there's a real coming together of the right and left.

Now, some of it is crackpottery, but in this area of massive distrust and that there's a real reason for it.

I think Michelle Goldberg nailed it in her column about him.

He is the candidate of the distrustful.

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And those folks, because they have been lied to or misled on other things, are going to be inclined to believe they're not hearing the truth on many things and some of the things they really are, right? This is the, I'm sure it's probably universal, but it feels very much the problem of our time is parsing when I think I'm getting the straight story from institutions, from media and telling people, no, no, no, you're, you're conspiracizing about this thing.

Except then that thing like sort of ends up being true.

And I have to make a culpa on that and be like, I was trying to be reasonable, but you actually were correct about this when they were hiding the ball on this.

So we have a real problem with that.

And it does create grounds for more conspiracy theories.

Right.

We talk about how there's this rising distrust, but that seems to me to rely on a Halcyon story of American institutions, including the media, a version in which there used to be a limited number of media institutions, and they would all kind of generally agree on what got covered and what didn't get covered.

And you see again and again how stories that were impactful, you know, if you go back through the New York Times archives and just look for the word homosexuality,

how stories that were particularly impactful in the lives of minorities from African Americans to LGBT people were just not covered,

or covered them as if they were speaking for a general audience that thought they were weird and gross and should be isolated.

And so the idea of distrusting major institutions, including the media, seems to be just kind of how we should generally feel.

You know, that old story for journalists that if your mother tells you that she loves you, you should like double check.

Should that just be how we think about institutions?

Yes.

And I'll bring you a moment of unity from the CNN set over those Trump years, but Angela Rye and I used to be on together.

She's certainly a left-leaning commentator, I would say quite liberal.

We're far apart on issues, but we are not far apart on distrust of institutions.

And so when there was a widespread compulsion to just say like the intelligence community and the FBI are full of unassailable public servants doing what we need them to do,

and how dare you try to question the work that they're doing.

Angela and I would look at each other and be like, I mean, is this the FBI that spied on Martin Luther King?

That's the one we're talking about.

And this is where I think, again, the historical context can be helpful to people when you're talking about this.

Instead of Angela Rye's no Trump booster by a long shot, but she has a healthy distrust of an institution that has earned that distrust.

I think one of the problems with media is it does appear to me and it does appear accelerated in the past 10 years or so.

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When one side is in charge of the institutions, there is far less skepticism.
I would like there to be tons of skepticism all the time.
I struggle with how not to tip into cynicism, but I am largely skeptical of all government endeavors, and they have the power unlike any other institution to violently withhold your freedom.
So I think that's important.
It's important to ask questions of them.
And if my side is in charge, that doesn't mean that things are going swimmingly.
I don't want to go back to a time when there were three newscasts and that all the facts came from those people.
I love that the internet gives us primary coverage, primary documents that you can go back and read yourself that are not filtered through someone else.
Now, you're going to build your own filters, and sometimes those filters are going to be faulty and you need to test yourself on that.
But you can find more primary information than we've ever had access to in the past from government, from candidates, from events that you were not at.
And I think that that's important and valuable.
And I think perhaps people are more distrustful because they see more things.
There's more available to them to parse these things.
And then sometimes I think they're wrong, but they're seeing more of the picture sometimes and seeing what was kept from them, just as other populations had seen that earlier.
So we've been talking about institutions that are made up of a lot of actors in many complex organizations, talking about the media.
How do you think about rebuilding an institution, even if you can say the media is an institution, where there's no central governing body that drives the media?
Look, it is all distributed and it is all changing.
This is not to get too existential about it, but we talk about these institutions as if they have been in stasis at any particular time, right?
They have been changing with administrations.
They have been changing with cultural wins.
They have been changing with economic forces for decades.
I mean, I watched newspapers falling off the ledge, right?
That happened right when I was in them in 2004 or five and happened to move to sort of a new media position and was like, hey, look at that.
But these things have been changing for a long time.
I do not know how you institute, like for instance, a cultural understanding that raucous debate and free speech is good, which I think is should be the default position of journalists.
Once that cultural understanding is gone, particularly in elite universities from where many journalists are coming, I don't know how you re-institute that.
You know, it would be nice.
So when you come into an organization that is a sensibly a practitioner of free speech, maybe there's

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a onboarding that includes some talk of that and why it's important.

Because they're not getting it often in college.

In the context of that, you can talk about the problems that we must grapple with while we're having that conversation, right?

But I do think, you know, there's plenty of money spent on onboarding about many, many, many other issues.

And perhaps that should be one of them that is part of the discussion in your training when you come to a new journalistic endeavor.

I want to shift the conversation to talk about schools.

That's an issue that you've talked a lot about and an issue on which you see Republicans really voicing a lot of distrust in schools and education.

But I want to put that in a little bit of broader context because that's not new.

Contrary to what people may believe, the Department of Education was not birthed by George Washington, the Department of Education was established under the Carter administration.

And since time immemorial, and that means 1980, there's been a lot of talk from Republicans about wanting to shut down the Department of Education.

We've heard that again from Republican candidates.

Governor Ronda Santos said that this week.

You've heard that from other candidates, but this isn't new.

Since 1980, you saw that in 1995, there's a real effort to shut down the Department of Education.

Why that distrust historically and why that distrust recently?

Well, one, and this does not apply to the entire GOP primary voter population because many of them are not ideological.

But there is an ideological bent toward, I mean, I'm like very libertarian on some on many things.

And if I had my druthers would live in a world where there were far fewer federal agencies, just period.

Because I think if the federal government were less expansive and took fewer experts to run each individual thing, it might actually do things better.

That's part of it.

There is a distrust among center-right folks of orders coming from the federal government all the way down.

And that that is, in the case of education especially, and I think you saw some of this on the left with no child left behind,

that these things can't be tailored to schools that need to do different things, right?

I have been open to that idea.

My mother was a teacher, I've seen it, right?

So I think there's some of that.

The new enthusiasm, passion for the distrust of these institutions from school boards on up comes from extended closures during COVID.

Now, I was sort of steeped in this because I was in an area that schools closed for more than a year, and the fight to get them open was pitched to say the least.

A lot of parents, not right-leaning parents, this is Northern Virginia,

learned for the first time and were genuinely surprised, even I was surprised as a skeptic of

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government in general,
that the school board was adversarial to many parents just asking for their kids to be in school.
And the treatment was bad to the point of one of my friends who was an activist on this being told
that she just wanted her brunches back.
You saw this in various school boards that, hey, do you want your kid dead or do you want them
educated?
That was an actual school board member in Alexandria, Virginia who said that is paraphrased, but it
is not unfaithful to the spirit of that quote.
And so a lot of people who were very invested in that fight, many of them not ideological, many of
them not right-leaning,
started noticing more things that their school board was doing or their school was doing,
or got more angry at their schools for treating them the way that they treated them during this fight.
And I think a lot of them who had no opinion on, say, teachers unions before or had a vaguely
positive vision of teachers unions
got pretty upset with them, particularly a place like Virginia where teachers were put at the front of
the line
and then told everybody, no, no, we're not going to go back.
They were put at the front of the line for vaccines.
The ask was, let's get back in school.
The answer was, no.
So this made people very upset.
And I have been sort of mystified during this entire debate by the fact that many on the left believed
that there would not be a large consequence
for having closed a daily part of sort of given public facility, a service that you pay taxes for that you
know is going to be there.
And it might not be perfect.
It might not even be good in some cases.
But the doors are going to open.
And then the answer was, they're not going to open.
You're fine.
Shut your mouths.
And that wasn't the truth.
The kids weren't fine.
Some of them did fine.
I don't want to paint with a too broad a brush.
But of course, there was a loss of trust there.
Of course, Democrats in some polls lost 20 points generational advantage on the issue of education.
And they deserved to because this was a disservice.
The COVID death toll in 2021 was higher than in 2020.
It feels obvious in hindsight that schools should have been open.
But again, the start of the 2020-2021 school year, we were not even remotely out of the woods and
especially what we knew at the time is different.
Does it feel like there was a good reason at all to keep school doors closed to you?

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Okay.

So I will give you the end of 2020 school year.

At that time, I was like, oh, gosh, that seemed weird.

Maybe we should take extreme measures.

And we did not know yet how it affected children.

I get that.

So even with some shutdown things, I was a little too acquiescent to those in my mind, right?

Well, this does seem like a once in a lifetime event for a little while.

But I think if you look back at the data and some of the reporting at the time, you will see, I believe it was an NPR report by Anya Kamenetz.

I think it was a June report on kids of essential workers who were therefore exposed more than other kids were being taken care of at YMCA's and other facilities so that their parents could work and the ways that they figured out to make that work.

And the early data from that, as we had seen from early data from Denmark or Sweden, was that, in fact, it wasn't passing from these kids to these caretakers that it wasn't creating these huge outbreaks.

And I think had there been, as there was in some red states, as there was among private schools, a bent toward the idea of opening as opposed to stuck on the closing, you would have modulated fairly quickly.

You've written that students will need creative solutions to come back from this damage.

They deserve better than power consolidated in the hands of those who failed them, just to your point.

Looking forward, what ideas have you come across that are interesting to you?

Yeah, so I do think that in many cases, workplaces and schools is another area.

We have earned flexibility from this terrible situation that COVID gave us and that in some cases, flexibility can give you the creative solutions.

Often, parents created those for themselves with pods or with homeschooling.

There's data all over the place that homeschooling has gone up exponentially, particularly in minority communities who adopted it.

And so I think ways to give them resources, Virginia is a place where there's now a credit to pay for the intensive tutoring that your kid might need after the schools were closed for so long.

I think those are ways that we can help.

I'm not averse to spending on that, especially when COVID spending has already gone out the door and exists.

But frankly, there's not a magic bullet, I think is my concern, and that we are so behind the ball that it gets pretty daunting.

One of the challenges you face in school curriculum in general, whether it's about closures or whether it's about arguments over what children are taught when, is that this will always be hinged on the most motivated people getting involved.

But you also need to consider the interests of all children, including the children who have parents who aren't involved at all.

You mentioned increasing numbers of people homeschooling.

There's been a lot of talk about the rise of charter schools and advocacy for private school vouchers.

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You've seen that system in a bunch of states.

But again, those systems often will leave behind students who are already always left behind, students who aren't able to navigate applying for charter schools or private schools themselves, students who might be in foster care.

My concern is always that when you are relying on parents being super motivated, you know that there is a swath of people who are parents in legal terms, but may not be involved in their children's lives much at all.

The point of having a public entity like the Department of Education and like the concept of public education in general,

is that you care about the kids when even their own parents don't.

If you have any experience or have worked with kids who are in the juvenile justice system or in foster care,

or children who have suffered abuse and often neglect, for whom school is where they will get fed.

School is where someone will notice if they are there.

School is where someone will see that you have bruises or you are wearing the same clothes for days and days and days.

And these are all things that happen to kids who are in the system and out of the system.

I really worry about how a focus on an increasing privatization of schooling that, again, is driven by parents who care a lot about their kids,

and understandably are more concerned about their kids than the kids of just some dude.

I get that, I totally do.

But how do you think about this problem of the kids who are already getting left behind?

How do we make sure they aren't more so? Is that even possible?

Okay, so the idea is that a public entity in a public school system cares about everyone's kids, even the kids that their own parents aren't caring about them, the people who the rest of society doesn't see and doesn't take care of.

We tested that notion. In many cases, it wasn't true.

It was not true. They had a year to show that it was true, 18 months in some cases.

That is such a giant failure of that concept that, understandably, people wonder, why am I dealing with you?

Why are you the entity that we're asking to care about these kids when you actively did not?

So, I think we first have to acknowledge that when rubber hit the road, many public schools were not there.

And then when many parents, myself included, argued that they should be there for that exact reason,

they called us a bunch of names, up to and including racists or wine moms or yoga moms or whatever it was.

That that advocacy was not something that was real when many of them were arguing, yes, on behalf of their kids,

but on behalf of other kids, too, I don't think it's the right answer for everyone to abandon public schools.

So, I don't want as a society to abandon this infrastructure that is here, that does have these resources.

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In many cases, a lot of resources because the COVID money came in and most of it has not been spent.

I would like that to be spent on, like, I don't know, not maybe major new admin expenses, but actual student stuff.

I think that's a place where you can advocate for good behavior in your school board to actually focus it on the kids.

So, there are things to be done, but I think it argues for parent involvement from those who are deeply concerned

and who have the bandwidth sometimes to argue for other kids.

You know, because that's what teachers are doing, too. The good teachers are advocating not for their own kids.

They're advocating for many kids, right? So, that's a thing you can do even while being a concerned parent.

What would you change about the public school system to address some of those dynamics?

The dynamics that you see between parents and teachers unions where parents are getting called one mom

and teachers are getting called grooming Nazis.

There's an impasse here that forgets that some parents are teachers and some teachers are parents and they're all people who generally care about kids, I assume.

What would you change about that to one, and that impasse of some sort, and two, get us to a better footing?

I think the problem that plagues this conversation is the one that plagues all American conversations,

which is, you know, one of the things that when I speak on college campuses, and I'll speak often with my co-author guy,

is it will challenge students if they want to know how to be more supportive of free speech or to even engage with the notion that it's like good, which many of them reject, maybe do a book trade,

even if it's just a piece, right? Let's keep it low barrier of entry.

Talk to each other for 20 minutes, set a timer, without either one of you questioning the motives of the other person.

When I tell college students that, they're like, could I do that?

Look, it can be tricky, but it used to be something that I do feel we're better at,

and I do think there used to be a general understanding that allowing lots of ideas to flourish and battle each other in the public square was a societal good.

I disagree.

You don't think we used to believe that?

No, we did not.

I think that with the Let Many Flowers Bloom idea, only certain flowers were permitted to bloom within a specific,

you know, it's like when people talk about like, oh, you know, Congress used to work better because Democrats, Republicans all gathered,

and I'm like, yeah, they were basically the same person.

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I do think that that era of like, working together, I mean, to me, based on my understanding of events taking place before like 1970, is that yes, people were getting along in some ways because certain people were permitted to be in positions of power, and they all generally kind of knew and liked each other.

Well, I guess maybe I can rephrase that in that the understanding of cultural elites even 10 years ago was sort of default that free speech served society, that flourishing of viewpoints, that having raucous debates.

Now, they maybe didn't live that in their lives, and I agree with you that at times obviously different viewpoints are allowed to flourish and not others.

So I think we have lost a cultural understanding there that I try to bring to the table.

So that's why that conversation is bad.

I do not know how to make it better aside from the tiny small work that I do in my daily life to have this conversation, to have conversations online where I'm not calling people names, where I'm attempting to engage with their actual ideas.

Look, sometimes do I think they're full of it?

Yes, and sometimes I'll say that, but I just think this is the same thing plaguing this conversation as it's plaguing everything else.

People question, go immediately to questioning motives, and then it turns into this toxic thing.

And by the way, then you'll discover at times maybe the motive should have been questioned.

And that's sort of the part of making it even more toxic.

It's very, very tough work.

I agree with you that it wasn't some like heyday when we were all great at talking to each other, but I do think there was less incentive to find the disagreement with your neighbor instead of say, hey, we both root for the same team.

Let's talk about that.

It's like we got to find the other thing.

And then once we find the other thing that we disagree on, I must eliminate you from my life.

As opposed to engaging with that idea, I can't break bread with you because you are now in this group.

Polling shows that that has increased and is not great for us putting up those kind of walls.

And I think those kind of walls exist between school boards and parents in many cases.

I want to close that by talking a little bit about 2024.

Republicans have an abundance of choice, arguably too much choice in the GOP primary.

What do you think Republicans are ultimately choosing between?

What they're actually choosing between is the chance to win a national election and the chance to lose one dramatically.

That doesn't mean that Trump for sure would lose.

Not at all.

But look, he's very vulnerable.

It's a perfect storm for Democrats, really, in that every indictment is an indictment bump, but only in the primary.

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It's not like you're winning suburban moms with your indictment bumps, which is what you need to do this.

And the thing that I put to many Trump voters is, how's he going to do it differently?

What's the plan?

Like, I don't want to argue with you about 2020, but he's not the president.

So what does he do differently?

And his answer is nothing.

His answer is nothing.

He thinks that he's beloved in Nevada.

Suburban moms, not a problem.

Not a problem at all.

He doesn't need to win them.

He doesn't need to do anything with independence.

He doesn't need to win the Collar Counties of Philadelphia.

He doesn't need to change his message in Arizona.

And to them, I say, look, if you're losing in Arizona and Georgia, you lost a long time ago.

And you got to make a plan to do something different.

Now, I would say every other candidate does have some thoughts about how one would run differently than 2020.

And that is, I know the bars on the floor are y'all, but that is how you pitch winning in 2024.

Now, I'm not the voice of the GOP electorate very clearly, okay?

I try to respect that and I try to listen to people.

But I do think he's just sort of forgoing the idea of even thinking about how he could change anything to win the presidency.

So I think if you're interested in winning the presidency under this banner, then you need to think about that.

I think that there's a book to be written that's like Donald Trump's guide to having just perpetual confidence in yourself.

Like it's almost inspiring, concerning, but inspiring.

And it's spanned his career, right?

Yes.

Any loss is not a loss.

Any bankruptcy is not really a bankruptcy.

Any loss of money is not really a loss of money.

Any bad press is not really bad press.

And often it works.

I don't know how to solve that problem.

The candidates that will hopefully be on stage with him in a debate, if he shows up, have a weird needle to thread.

Right.

You have to speak to Trump voters.

You cannot just abandon them or tell them they're all terrible or be too critical of Trump.

If you're a Chris Christie, I don't think you're earning a lot of those votes.

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Although I will say a forceful good speaker can make headway in a way that Christie has by just kind of being bold and confident.

And he has done that.

I would say the argument against his candidacy is that he's like, I'm going to take Trump down.

It's like, well, you had a chance to do that before and you didn't.

All of them have to walk this weird line where they don't attack him too much, but they find the right way to attack him.

And if they tag him too much, that's actually a bump for him.

And if he gets bad news, that's actually a bump for him also.

And people don't want to hear about policy.

They want to hear about the fights you're having.

But if you haven't talked about the fights you're having, the independence and the suburban moms are going to hate you.

It is not easy, but it's not designed to be easy.

And it is a puzzle.

And I think, to me, the simple message is, are you winning with this guy?

Are you winning so much that you're tired of winning?

Because it doesn't feel like I'm tired of winning right now.

I can win.

I can get results.

That's the other thing.

He was the president in some places for conservatives, he got results.

And many of the things he most complains about, he didn't.

So you say, he was there for four years.

He had his chance.

He didn't do it.

I can do it.

Here's how I'm going to do it.

You've talked about how Governor Brown DeSantis has the power to combine populism with traditional conservatism.

What does that mean?

So I think, to me, he is the, now this is like on paper.

He is the obvious choice that Trump voters could like him.

He has not turned them off in any major way.

He has a bit of the, he fights vibe.

That's one of the things I think, I really like Tim Scott.

And I think he has a talent for a fundraising, be speaking and making a moment for himself.

He's very good at sort of getting a little flare up of like, oh, this is his moment.

And he makes people feel good about America.

He is a happy warrior.

I am not convinced the electorate is looking for a happy warrior.

I think they're looking for a warrior, happy to be disproven because I like to be a happy warrior myself.

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But I think DeSantis has more of that.

I am a fighter versus a happy warrior, which is something that people like from Trump and want from Trump.

I think that he has a real distinguishing moment, which is the COVID moment.

Now, a lot of Trump supporters will very swiftly start defending every lockdown policy or every policy choice that Donald Trump made

and sort of throw out the window all their tweets from 2020 that were upset about these things.

I think DeSantis has a record that he can say,

again, I don't know whether the electorate is in for this, but I think there's a very obvious point to be made, which is, look,

knock on me is like, I'm really into the numbers.

I'm too into the numbers, not enough glad handing, whatever.

I look at the numbers because I care about getting policy right and I looked at the numbers very deeply in 2020

and I got this call right in a lot of ways where he got it wrong and we would have been in a different place,

particularly the schools being open is a win for him.

I think just a clean win.

And Trump supporters will say, well, he said that schools should go back and it's like, true, I will defend him on that.

He did say that in summer 2020 that they should work on it.

Did he have a plan for making that happen?

No.

And that's where you get to the difference between the two.

So I think to my mind, the lockdowns of 2020 and the school shutdowns, one of the major civil liberty battles of our time where it was just like this vast,

very quickly decided, almost no process.

You can't go to restaurants and you can't go to church.

That's a big deal.

And a lot of people want to treat it like it's not a big deal and maybe I'm the outlier, but I do think there's an argument to be made for his,

and yes, it was, I think it was partially ideological that his tendency was to value as much freedom as possible to do those everyday things and valuing the economy.

Yes, while also attempting to protect people.

And I think the preservation of freedom itself was valuable.

I think that's an argument he can make.

I wonder how many GOP voters care about it once Trump is on the stage fighting against it.

I don't know.

A bunch of people kind of center right people expected that 2022 would be a red wave and a bloodbath in part because of COVID policy,

that there were a host of Democratic governors and Democratic leaders who had put forth very strict lockdown policies that they themselves may not even really abided by.

And a lot of states and that they would get punished by the electorate for it.

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And that didn't happen.

No, it was basically Virginia, Nevada, and like New Jersey was a close call.

And that was all, most of that was 2021.

Yep, like Gretchen Whitmer, stronger than ever.

You saw this, Minnesota, you saw in Ohio, even with having Republican governor, people get very mad at him because of lockdown policies or his COVID policies.

He's fine.

Do we have a shorter memory for COVID than you thought we would?

Absolutely.

And this is one thing where I cop to caring deeply about this and therefore possibly overreading it.

I didn't overread it in Virginia.

That was one moment where I was like, I think this is all going to hinge on schools.

And a couple of people were like, no, that's crazy.

Nobody in Northern Virginia is voting for Yonkin over schools.

And I was like, okay, we'll see.

So there are moments where that happened.

There were not a lot of moments where that happened.

There were more in those numbers I was talking about earlier, which is a big deal with Democrats losing a double-digit generational lead on education, that kind of thing.

Part of it, I think, is that it was a really, really hard time, particularly in the places that were most shut down and people don't want to think about it.

They want to move on from that.

And so I think that rehashing it can come with trouble.

And this is one of, I think, one of the challenges that DeSantis faces, of course, as usual in the primary,

no rules apply to Donald Trump, but they all apply to everyone else.

So Donald Trump can talk about 2020 all day, and that's fine.

But talking about 2020 and 2021 and your actual policies on the ground in this very formidable moment for our country is like, well, are we looking back for it a little too much?

So prosecuting that case is hard.

But I do think there's more appetite for it in a GOP primary electorate than there is in the general electorate.

I think that part of why the conservative ecosystem is rooting for Ron DeSantis is that he is a conservative that they understand.

He supported privatizing Social Security back in 2012.

He was talking about how he really wanted to embrace then-representative Paul Ryan's policies back in 2012.

I think that there's a sense to me, as someone who thinks a lot about conservatism, has looked and watched conservatism for a very long time,

that Ron DeSantis is a conservative that conservatives get.

You know, he's run Florida as a conservative.

When he was in Congress, he was a conservative Republican.

Donald Trump is not a conservative.

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People have said that repeatedly and expected people to be like, oh, well, in that case, I shall not vote for him.

But that isn't what happened.

He's done things that conservatives liked on judges or tax cuts, things like that.

But there was really kind of a sense of like waving a carrot in front of him and being like, okay, here's the judicial nominations we would like.

No, please stop tweeting.

And now DeSantis trails Trump by close to 30 percentage points in recent polling.

What do you make of that gap and what that says about where the conservative ecosystem is right now?

One thing I have to be careful of and one thing that I was not careful of in 2016 is forgetting that I am ideological.

Most people are not.

And I have to think about, as I say sometimes to political crowds, is that when you're talking to the normies, who you have to earn their votes,

one of the things you want to do is just keep in mind that you are like a giant days of our lives, wrestling fan, whatever it is,

that in your mind, like everything that happens every single day is deeply important to the country and to the storyline.

And you must tune in every day.

And your friend who doesn't watch Days of Our Lives or Wrestling is like, I don't know.

I feel like if I tune in four years from now, Hope and Bo will be kind of like doing the same thing.

And I'll just check in then.

So you have to adjust for that.

And many people don't.

And many people in GOP leadership don't.

One of the things that struck me about 2016 is I think it was true.

There were many good messengers for conservatism, for this slate of issues and ideas on that stage who were not Donald Trump.

And the fact that they were good messengers for that message means the message was rejected.

They wanted a new suite of things to talk about.

And so to my mind, many of those who are critical of Trump, as I am, but many of those who are very critical of Trump,

don't deal with that reality of the GOP electorate, that their desires were not being met by this other slate of issues.

Right. DeSantis is a more movement conservative style.

So there is that.

But I think, again, he gives a fighter vibe.

But yes, I think you're largely right.

One of the reasons conservatives have turned to him is I think he has a record.

He raises money.

That big win for him and his reelect is a huge part of this puzzle as well.

I mean, the proof's in the pudding.

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That's one of the early answers to Trump that was effective was he was kind of just like, look at the scoreboard, man.

Like, I appreciate you being my constituent, but like, look what I did.

That's real.

DeSantis is not just very conservative.

He is also performing being very conservative in a way that I find extraordinarily off-putting on a personal level.

His campaign made that ad that basically celebrated the anger of LGBT people and attacked Donald Trump for saying he'd protect LGBTQ people from terrorism.

That's literally to me.

I'm like, absolutely not.

I would sooner set myself on fire than support him.

I get that there's the political impulse to promise pizza for everyone and you can't do it.

But also do not turn off like a large swath of Americans, especially when you're going to need to turn them back on later.

Yes. Okay.

So I think some of this is a play for Iowa specifically.

I get that.

Where Kim Reynolds enjoys 50-plus percent approval.

Just right.

She was so nasty to Mr. Trump.

And actually, Iowans responded badly to that.

Yes, they did.

Many of them gave an answer that said, no, thank you to that.

I think it was 70-plus percent disapproved of that attack on her.

Also, she signed a six-week abortion ban.

There are other examples of Kemp in Georgia, DeWine in Ohio, winning by huge margins, and having done that because it's something that they believe in, right?

So on that issue in particular, I think he looks to those numbers and says,

look, this is a thing that I promised or I believe in,

and it does not have to be a deal-breaker.

So I think some of this is a play for Iowa.

And I think some of it, frankly, is a dance that we always do in every primary,

which is like, oh, we got a dance over here to the right,

and then we're going to come on back.

So I'm not sure how much of that is unique to him,

but I do think it poses a challenge, particularly, and he's made this argument,

he says suburban voters were his bread and butter in Florida.

So again, you go back to that roadmap and say,

okay, well, how did we win those folks?

And the question is, did you win them with these messages

or did you win them with a different message?

Because eventually, you're going to have to get back to winning them

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because you don't win the presidency without those suburban collars
of all these major metro centers in Virginia
in Pennsylvania and Arizona and Georgia, especially Georgia.
So I think it becomes a challenge for him,
but it's a challenge that most primary,
most people in a competitive primary must deal with at some point.
We like to conclude with book recommendations.

So, Mary-Catherine Ham, what are your book recommendations?

Oh, yes.

Okay, so my favorite, maybe my favorite book of all time is
Wise Blood by Flannery O'Connor.

It's just like the right amount, creepy and Christian
and like the Christ-haunted south and bizarre stuff going on,
also beautifully written.

So that's like an American classic.

So I just read The Rules of Civility by Emmer Tolles,
just a beautiful writer.

I had also read a gentleman in Moscow.

He's one of those writers that I don't really even care
what you're writing.

Michael Chabon is similar.

The prose is just so good.

And then I'll do a shout out to Matthew Contanetti's The Right,
which is a history of the American right and conservatism,
which we'll speak to in a more erudite sense than I did.

Many of the things that we have talked about in this podcast,
I read that a couple of months ago and it's readable and fair.

And even if you just do parts of it,
you'll learn things about the arc of conservatism I did,
and I've been in this for 25 years or so.

Yeah, I had a conversation with Matthew a couple of years ago
when I was at Vox.

And one thing he told me was like,
well, the challenge is,
no one really knows what conservatism is.

In my car.

And it's become more and more unclear
over the past several years.

What a journey we're all on.

Well, Mary Catherine Hamm,

thank you so much for joining me on The Ezra Klein Show.

Thank you so much for having me.

I really enjoyed it.

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This episode of The Ezra Klein Show was produced by Kristen Lin,
fact-checking by Michelle Harris
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Our senior engineer is Jeff Gilt.
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The show's production team also includes
Emifa Agawu and Roland Hu.
Original music by Isaac Jones.
Audience strategy by Christina Samieluski and Shannon Busta.
The executive producer of Nartum's opinion audio
is Annie Rose Strasser.
And special thanks to Sonya Herrero.