

**The David and Barbara Pryor Center  
for  
Arkansas Oral and Visual History**

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**Blue to Red Oral History Project**

Asa Hutchinson  
Interviewed by John C. Davis  
May 27, 2021  
Little Rock, Arkansas

## Objective

Oral history is a collection of an individual's memories and opinions. As such, it is subject to the innate fallibility of memory and is susceptible to inaccuracy. All researchers using these interviews should be aware of this reality and are encouraged to seek corroborating documentation when using any oral history interview.

The Pryor Center's objective is to collect audio and video recordings of interviews along with scanned images of family photographs and documents. These donated materials are carefully preserved, catalogued, and deposited in the Special Collections Department, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville. The transcripts, audio and video files, and photographs are made available on the Pryor Center Web site at <http://pryorcenter.uark.edu>. The Pryor Center recommends that researchers utilize the audio and video recordings in addition to the transcripts to enhance their connection with the interviewee.

## Transcript Methodology

The Pryor Center recognizes that we cannot reproduce the spoken word in a written document; however, we strive to produce a transcript that represents the characteristics and unique qualities of the interviewee's speech pattern, style of speech, regional dialect, and personality.

The Pryor Center transcripts are prepared utilizing the *University of Arkansas Style Manual* for proper names, titles, and terms specific to the university. For all other style elements, we refer to the *Pryor Center Style Manual*, which is based primarily on *The Chicago Manual of Style 17th Edition*. We employ the following guidelines for consistency and readability:

- Em dashes separate repeated/false starts and incomplete/redirected sentences.
- Ellipses indicate the interruption of one speaker by another.
- Italics identify foreign words or terms and words emphasized by the speaker.
- Question marks enclose proper nouns for which we cannot verify the spelling and words that we cannot understand with certainty.
- Brackets enclose
  - italicized annotations of nonverbal sounds, such as laughter, and audible sounds, such as a doorbell ringing; and
  - annotations for clarification and identification.

- Commas are used in a conventional manner where possible to aid in readability.

### **Citation Information**

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**John C. Davis interviewed Asa Hutchinson on May 27, 2021, in Little Rock, Arkansas.**

[00:00:00]

John Davis: Here with me today is Governor Asa Hutchinson.

The governor is in his second term as governor of Arkansas. Prior to that he served in many different positions, both at the party-leadership level in Arkansas. He served as a US House Representative in Arkansas—representing Arkansas, and he's also served in the George W. Bush administration. On behalf of the Pryor Center, thank you very much for sitting down with me today. Your experience in Arkansas politics and, really, the history of the GOP is gonna offer us invaluable insights into this project, and I thank you very much for giving us some of your time.

Asa Hutchinson: I'm absolutely glad to be with you and grateful for this project and the opportunity to talk about it.

[00:00:44] JD: When we decided to look at this really pivotal historical moment that we're witnessing in real time in many ways, I started to look at the history of the party particularly beginning in the 1960s in the lens of three generations to try to make sense of what we were seeing today and the events that it took prior to this moment to really see where we are with

supermajorities in the General Assembly, full slate of state constitutional officers who are Republican, all six positions, whether it be the Senate or House, Republican. And so I look at the mid to late[19]60s beginning with the election of Winthrop Rockefeller as a Republican into the early [19]90s as that first generation where we see GOP success in sort of fits and starts. Arguably relatively limited in grand scope. We still are a party at that time—or a state, rather, that has really one-party dominance at that time, with some exceptions in the 1980s where you see a few elected to Congress as Republicans. Overall, we see from top to bottom, still, a state that is heavily entrenched in Democratic politics extending, really, all the way to Reconstruction. [00:02:01] We then have the second generation. By then, we do see a lot of our neighboring states becoming more Republican. Arkansas, on the other hand, continues between the early [19]90s to 2010 or so being a state that's still arguably rooted in Democratic politics and a Democratic history but is seeing more successes with Republican candidates for office. I'm sure we'll talk later about Governor Huckabee's success and also your own in Congress. Your brother being elected to the US Senate in the 1990s is also a historical moment in our time. All the way up to about 2010

where, again, we're seeing a competitive GOP in the state of Arkansas enjoying at that time unprecedented success but had not really yet reached its full potential, which is what we see today from roughly 2011 to our time of recording, which is in 2021, where we see unprecedented success and growth in the party. And really a situation where Arkansas has gone from one-party domination with the Democratic Party for over a century to now a few election cycles of dominance with the GOP.

[00:03:14] So just as we sort of frame that, I'd like to ask you, what is your earliest political memory in Arkansas?

AH: [*Laughs*] Well, my earliest political memory, actually, is, believe it or not, my parents dividing their vote between John Kennedy and Richard Nixon. And so that—I understood growing up that my parents were independents. They were not necessarily tied to any party. They voted for the person, and very independent about it, and so I did not grow up with any political influence in terms of parties, but I did grow up with parents that were politically engaged and at least talked about it and voted regularly, and then—that's sort of a fleeting memory, politically. But then my most significant moment was when I was in junior high school, and that's whenever Ronald Reagan made his election-night speech or speech before the election in behalf of

Barry Goldwater. And he was electrifying in terms of his simple, conservative message, and even at that time, you know, that appealed to me. It made sense to me. And so that is my memory of first being introduced to Ronald Reagan that I later campaigned for and actually served in his administration as United States Attorney.

[00:04:58] JD: And certainly a time period where we do see a lot of that independent streak in Arkansas voters being in the 1960s. By 1968, of course, there's that historical election where Arkansas voters reelect J. William Fulbright as a Democrat. They select then sort of an alternative-ticket candidate in George Wallace and then also elect Winthrop Rockefeller in a reelection bid in 1968. So Arkansas voters are interesting, an interesting, independent bunch in many ways, even though they were, at that time in particular, in a state that was very deeply rooted in Democratic Party politics. At that time, thinking back maybe during those formative years in the 1960s, where you mentioned Ronald Reagan and Senator Goldwater, do you recall the perception of the Democratic Party and the Republican Party at—you know, in terms of just bein' a kid growin' up in Arkansas.

[00:05:57] AH: Well, I mean, there was really only the Democratic party in Arkansas, and all the leaders were Democratic and—we

looked at the national scene, though, and the leaders that I wanted to follow were more in the conservative bent, which, again, was Ronald Reagan's message, so that defined my generation in terms of identifying with conservative politics. Now the Democratic Party in Arkansas was all there was. And a good illustration of that is whenever I got out of law school—actually while I was in law school going to the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, I was clerking with judge—well, then Jim Hendren. Later became a federal judge, but he was practicing law on the square of Bentonville. And he, as so many others, were classmates of David Pryor, so my first race that I got engaged in was actually going door-to-door for David Pryor when he was in his—in the runoff with Senator John McClellan, which he actually lost to John McClellan. [00:07:15] But you know, if you wanted to be engaged in politics, it was on the Democratic side, and whenever I was thinking as a young lawyer, practicing law in Bentonville, getting my career started, I had to make a decision which direction to go. And my fellow lawyers came to me and said, "If you wanna be a judge, if you wanna be a prosecuting attorney, if you wanna have any career in Arkansas, then you have to be a Democrat." And that was the message, and that was the reality, and so this would've been in



the 1975 timeframe, 1975, [19]76, and so the mid-[19]70s, that was it. That was all the action in town. Now, where were they philosophically? It was a social club, it was a political club, and you had a variety of true, Southern Democrats that were conservative. John McClellan. But you also had the liberal side of it, which was, of course, Fulbright, who had lost to Dale Bumpers, but Dale Bumpers was a liberal. You had David Pryor that was in between. And so within the only dominant party, you had different parts of the political spectrum, and you could sort of take your choice, but if you campaigned in Arkansas, you always pretended at least to be a conservative, even though you voted very liberal nationally. And that was the Democratic party in the mid-[19]70s whenever I started my political interest.

[00:09:02] JD: I think you touched on the political landscape there as well. You mentioned—sort of alluded to the fact that most of these elections were settled in the primary, months before the general election, and that's something that—it was not unique in Arkansas at the time, but I think what was unique is that it lingered longer, into even the next decade in some cases in Arkansas. You've had an extraordinarily active political life in national and state politics. And in 1991 following a hotly contested GOP nomination for governor between Tommy

Robinson and Sheffield Nelson, you became state party cochair with Mr. Nelson. Can you tell me about that time in the party? It seems like there was opportunity for the party to grow. That was a primary that the personality of Tommy Robinson, the background of Sheffield Nelson, seemed to culminate into pretty high turnout for the Republican primary, considering there were some systemic issues and rules that disadvantaged Republicans, which we'll get to in a little while here. But tell me about your time goin' into that office, that position in [19]91 as a cochair with Nelson, and then eventually carrying the office just on your own. You know, what was the potential there?

[00:10:25] AH: Well, actually, after the 1990 election, which—Bill Clinton was elected versus Sheffield Nelson in the general election after the hotly contested primary. That was when Herbert Walker Bush was president, and that election in 1990 was a bad year for Arkansas Republicans statewide, and mine was the closest race. I led the ticket running for attorney general. And in October before the November election in 1990, President Bush reneged on his no-tax pledge. And without any question, that shaved about five points off of every Republican across the board because people reacted to that unfavorably. And so it was a bad election cycle in 1990, but notwithstanding

that, I felt like we had some momentum. We were starting to get a lot of traction with the voters, that we had a good turnout in the primary, relatively speaking. And so I became cochair with Sheffield Nelson. And it was an exciting time because of course you had the newspaper coverage that was so dominant, and you had reporters that covered the politics in a competing fashion, and so that's why the personalities in that race followed by the continued conflict between the Tommy Robinson side of things and Sheffield Nelson, so it was very controversial, our cochairmanship. [00:12:07] But it worked very effectively. He was representing us at the national level, and I was representing us here at the Arkansas level, and really coordinating the activities of the party, the grass-roots part of it. That was sort of the division of responsibility. And then Sheffield left the cochairmanship subsequent to that, and so there was another three or four years that I had the chairmanship by myself during the mid-[19]90s. [00:12:37] And it was during that time that we grew effectively in the General Assembly, we grew in our numbers of elected officials, we grew in our congressional seats during that time. Of course, President Clinton got elected in the middle of that as well, which was putting Arkansas in the forefront once again and—of conflict, of storyline, and while that

played well for the Democrats and strengthened them because you had a president from your home state in the White House, we still had a good growth time all during those Clinton years in the White House. We're winning here in Arkansas incrementally, one step at a time. And then, of course, we made structural changes while I was chairman that greatly developed our turnout in the primaries and where we were on a competitive footing all of a sudden with the Democrats.

[00:13:40] JD: Could you tell me a little bit more about that? You played an integral role in that situation, and I'd just love to hear your insights on it.

AH: Well, one, we used the media a lot. So for example, Sheriff Marlin Hawkins. He wrote a book that came out during that time, and the title of it was *How I Stole Elections*. [JD laughs] Well, I'd been talkin' about the Democrat machine in Arkansas, and so I went and held a news conference holding up his book, "See, there's proof. They have been stealing elections in Arkansas." [Laughter] And so you know, we were very visible, we were very confrontational because we wanted to show the differences between the parties—you had to show the difference—and to give those options. And then we had to make structural changes. So in the primary, the primary elections and

the polling boxes were funded by the parties. And they were funded by filing fees of candidates. So obviously if you don't have very many candidates paying filing fees, you don't have very much money to put on a primary in the county. The Democrats had a gargantuan amount of money, and so they were able to have—like in Arkansas County, they would have thirty polling places that you could go vote as a Democrat. The Republican Party had one.

JD: Oof.

[00:15:12] AH: And they would make jokes that, you know, you'd have to travel thirty miles, and you'd have to—be lucky to find it if you're tryin' to vote in a Republican primary, and of course they steered people away from voting in a Republican Primary as well. And so we naturally had very low turnout, and then that fed on the difficulty of recruitin' candidates 'cause, "Look, why would I wanna vote as a Republican 'cause nobody votes in the primary? And nobody identifies with that." And so I filed a constitutional case sayin' under the Equal Protection Clause of our United States constitution that we have an unfair election system in Arkansas that does not give equal opportunity for the voters of both parties. And we lost that at the district court level, and we appealed to the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals,

and the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in our favor. And while I thought we's right, I was still a little bit surprised but thrilled with that result, and it was actually then Senator Beebe that said, "We've gotta fix that." And they immediately introduced legislation that said, "Let's don't have the parties pay for it, the state should pay for it, and we'll have joint primaries everywhere." And so that changed dramatically. So in Arkansas County and Desha County, you had equal opportunity for a Republican to vote as a Democrat. Winning that case and having joint primaries publicly funded changed the landscape of our party in Arkansas. [00:16:53] And we preceeded that— Doris Holke moved from Kansas here to Benton County, Arkansas. And so she was a retiree that came here, got active in the Republican Party. And Benton County was the same way. You know, it was paid for by the parties through filing fees, and we didn't have very many polling places. She initiated at the county level a joint primary even before it was mandated by the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals. And so that helped change Benton County, and we just took that model and applied it to the rest of the state. All of a sudden we're on equal footing.

[00:17:35] JD: And this is a time period, as you said, where the GOP was seeing incremental success and growth, but also you can go

a few decades back from that time period to see that Arkansans are favoring Republican presidential candidates, with the exception of maybe a Southern governor who's a Democrat or a favorite son in sort of a Clinton candidacy. But you've—you know, as you've touched on with Reagan—with Nixon prior to that. So I would think that not only are you helping open the door to Republicans in Desha or Arkansas County or Benton County, but you're also creating a situation where they're already showing a favoritism toward or at least leaning more toward nationally Republican candidates at the top of the ticket. So I would think that this really is a groundswell sort of scenario and really a foundational, I think, moment in the shift that we see, you know, years later, but it certainly plants the seeds. Just a such an important part of the state's history.

[00:18:29] AH: Absolutely. And you're correct that there was a disconnect, you know, that at the national election, presidential particularly, Arkansas voters identified with the Republican philosophy, with Republican candidates, and they would vote that way because there was generally a clear contrast. But it was by tradition, it was by habit, it was by structure, it was by social engagement, generational habits that they would vote Democrat locally. And we were starting to change that, and we

changed it first at the legislative level. And then, you know, it took a long time to get it down to the JP, the quorum court, county office level. But it all started with those joint primaries.

[00:19:22] JD: Stayin' in the [19]90s for just a moment longer, just in your opinion, if we go back to 1992, did that, in a way, help the Republican party that you had Clinton and others associated with him and his leadership—his long-term leadership that had been, you know, quite established at that point in Arkansas effectively removed and put into DC? Obviously, nationally speaking, that probably advantaged Arkansas Democrats in many ways, but did it help the GOP find opportunities? Certainly once Governor Huckabee, you know, years later, gets into office to sort of create a bench, for the first time, of talent?

[00:20:07] AH: It did. I mean, the talent pool of the Democratic Party was deep in the early [19]90s, and a lot of people were waiting for [laughs] Clinton to leave so that they could have an opportunity to be governor and have a shuffling of the offices so their talent pool could run. And so with Clinton finally going to the White House, that freed up a number of positions. Of course, Jim Guy Tucker became governor. He was elected in that race. That turned sour and gave an opportunity for the Lieutenant Governor Mike Huckabee to succeed to that office.



And so yes, it created openings. And that's what we had to have. We had to have open seats that you could compete on an even keel with the other side. We didn't fare well in the [19]90s running against incumbents. It was still tough. The power of incumbency. But an open seat in a fair playing field, we could compete. Now Mike Huckabee had just lost the race against Dale Bumpers for the United States Senate. He came out as a former Baptist minister from South Arkansas. He runs for the United States Senate. I was state party chairman. He sat in my office and said he was interested in running. Ran a great race. And it was grass roots, it was folksy, it was—he raised money for it, and he lost because he's runnin' against an incumbent, but he gained name recognition. And so shortly after that loss, he actually went in the hospital to recover from that emotional drain and physical drain of the campaign, and that's when Jim Guy Tucker succeeded to be governor when Clinton went to the White House. So we had to have a special election for lieutenant governor. And I immediately called him in the hospital and said, "You've got name ID [*phone rings*] statewide, you just finished a campaign, you've got organization, it's a special election, Republicans can win a special election. This is your opportunity." He pursued it, and he won in that special election. Fair playing

field, special election, it's the desire to get out and vote, and he won that, and of course that ultimately gave him the opportunity to be governor.

[00:22:42] JD: And as you've just alluded, he ascends to governor a few years later. Not elected, but assumes the constitutional duty when Jim Guy Tucker resigns amidst scandal. Being a governor, and also, course, seeing in the 1990s into the 2000s Mike Huckabee's tenure in office, could you speak a moment on the effect that just the considerable appointment power of a governor in Arkansas has and how that may have—or whether or not you think it advantaged Democrats sort of, maybe for allowing them to endure a little longer in Arkansas than in other states, particularly in the South and Midwest, and how Republicans under Huckabee and perhaps under, you know, your tenure, have been able to grow a base or grow a level of expertise or talent just through the pretty considerable appointment roles and duties that the governor has in Arkansas.

[00:23:42] AH: I—that's absolutely true. It is a gradual process because in the [19]90s whenever Governor Huckabee was there, he had to, one, get reelected, and he had to strengthen his base, and by growing his base, he actually appointed some Democrats in office, boards, and commissions. The Republicans had a

thinner bench. We, you know, didn't—and so Huckabee used a balanced strategy. He appointed many Republicans, and that helped us, and he also tried to do outreach and appoint African Americans or others to expand the base of our party. And but it took some time. One, it takes you about ten years or actually eight years to replace just about everybody in all the boards or commissions, so it took him time to do that. And then whenever he left the governorship, of course, I ran against Mike Beebe, lost in 2006, and you know, that set us back. All those appointments went back to the Democratic side. But because of the Huckabee administration, I was able to pull talent that he utilized, and it did help build our party, absolutely. And so to me, Governor Rockefeller set the example that a Republican can govern well. And then Governor Huckabee, with having a Democrat legislature, had to balance much of it, but he led aggressively, had incredible track record as governor, once again showing that governors—that Republicans can get elected, but they also can govern well. And I think that's only increased as we have continued to build our talent pool.

[00:25:51] JD: You've touched on your 2006 race for governor, and you've enjoyed, in 2014 and 2018, considerable success and, you know, as we're talking, enjoying your second term as a very

popular governor in Arkansas, but a governor that is seen as a strong governor with conservative credentials that is also pragmatic and has been able to govern the state through a pandemic and an economic crisis all at the same time. If you can, compare and contrast the political climate of 2006 to the political climate of 2014. Not that far apart, really. One individual serving two terms in Governor Beebe there between—bookended there, roughly. What changes? I mean, what did you see as a real challenge in your campaign in [20]06 that maybe seemed like it may be even an advantage or at least you maybe had the wind at your back a bit into the [20]14 race?

[00:26:58] AH: Well, 2006 across the board nationally was another bad year for Republicans. And so while I'm running at the state level, I'm running against a very, very formidable candidate, who was the sitting attorney general, so it was very similar to running against an incumbent. I had returned from Washington in the George W. Bush administration and with the disappointment about the economy, with some of the—our foreign engagements, the—George W. Bush had left with some challenges there, and so across the board, 2006 was not a good year. Now in terms of where we were as a party in Arkansas, we were competitive, we had our structures in place, our

organizations in place. We were continuing to win legislative seats and growing, not to the majority, but we were continuing to grow in those numbers. And so it's—it was a combination of incumbent-like candidates you're running against as well as a very difficult year nationally, and that tells the story. And that's not just in Arkansas, but it's across the country in governor's races. [00:28:27] You contrast that to eight years later. And eight years later, we're stronger, we have more seats, we're—it's a better year nationally, obviously, in 2014 coming after—with Obama in the White House and showing the contrast even to a greater extent as to the differences between the parties nationally, and that cascaded down. Even with that, it was a very tough race. In 2014, my opponent outraised me—you know, I think it was like \$9 million to \$6 million. So that's a very significant financial advantage that my opponent, Congressman Mike Ross, had over me. The first reporting period, he raised \$3 million dollars. And so I was out raised, but we won the race anyway. And which shows that the state mood, the national mood, our infrastructure, our grass-roots campaign paid off and resulted in a victory.

[00:29:41] JD: I don't think there's, you know, one facet in this that we can really—one variable that we can point to and say,

"Aha, that's why we see what we see in the last few years in the political climate of Arkansas." But you know, between that time period as well, we have the election of President Barack Obama, who is not popular in Arkansas. And I wonder, you know, to what extent do you think that helped Republicans draw sort of this—perhaps even move away from the old challenges as you've touched on in the 1990s of trying to separate yourself from your opponent who was maybe an incumbent, certainly a Democrat—explain to me that climate. Sort of, you know, why you think President Obama was—you know, struggled to identify with Arkansans, but also how that may have helped Republicans running for office in the state.

[00:30:36] AH: Well, it did, without any doubt. The contrast, the angst about the Obama administration, Obamacare, you know, his different policies, even defense did not strike well with Arkansans. And you contrast that with the Clinton years. Now Clinton had a lot of scandals, he had an impeachment trial, but he also was pragmatic and cut deals with a Republican Congress, and we actually balanced the budget during that time and did welfare reform. And so you know, it was not as big a contrast philosophically during the Clinton years as it was during the Obama years. And so the Obama years made Arkansans

understand deeply that they're actually conservatives, and they do not like the direction of a progressive, liberal agenda that outspends, that is weak for America, and that has government solutions, and is not conservative culturally, not pro-life. All of those distinctions made it easier for Republican candidates.

[00:31:54] And then during that time, also, the media makes a difference. Whenever you have the rise of Fox News, which started earlier, but it got strength—more strengthened. You know, you had candidates running for the quorum court that goes, knocks on a door, and the homeowner says, "Well, what's your position on immigration? What are you gonna do about border security? And so you know, are you running as a Republican or a Democrat?" And so national politics impacted the local elections. It was just another example of the nationalization of local politics. And the media drives that as well as the identification with the difference of philosophies at the White House level.

[00:32:39] JD: Forward just a bit, but kind of as a result, I think, in part, to what you're discussing, you know, in 2010, Republicans make very significant gains in Arkansas. But really, it's [20]12 and [20]14 where we start to see the scales really tip in favor of Republicans, and if 2010 had been sort of an anomaly, that may

have matched really well with what we had seen in the history of Arkansas politics and Republican politics, certainly up to that point, for a few decades. But we know now [20]12 and [20]14 are these just benchmark years. And other than your race in [20]14, are there a couple in [20]12 and [20]14 that you could point to now in hindsight and say, you know, that was indicative of a more enduring, you know, long-term situation where Republicans, the Republican Party, the Republican brand in Arkansas voters really had sort of joined in union to where they were committed conservatives, committed Republican voters in Arkansas? In other words, [20]12 and [20]14, are there races you can point to and say, "That's when the state became Republican?"

[00:33:48] AH: Well, you're gonna have to refresh me a little bit, actually. Some of those races in—I mean, 2010, of course, Jim Keet ran against Mike Beebe on his reelection, and his campaign never really took off, and so that was not in the mix. I was thinking of the congressional races and at what point we gained four, all four Republican seats.

JD: That's so—you know, in 2010 you've got Congressman Mike Ross wins his reelection bid, but that's also when we see Blanche Lincoln lose her contest in the Senate, so Representative



Boozman becomes Senator Boozman, so you start to see that groundswell. Rick Crawford wins successfully in the first, which was a historical moment to see a Republican win that Eastern part of the state. So you start to see that in 2010. [20]12 and [20]14 are when I see it in the General Assembly, where you start to see, you know, getting near and then at supermajority status. You see all—a full flank of constitutional officers. To me, those are you really start to see that real windfall.

[00:34:54] AH: Correct. And I would say the Boozman race against Blanche Lincoln probably typifies it because the usual strategies on the Democrat side did not work. I mean, here you have Blanche Lincoln, who's an incumbent, and as I said, it's hard taking down incumbents. But Blanche Lincoln not only was an incumbent, but she could make the case she was chairman of the Senate Agricultural Committee, which everybody in Eastern Arkansas knows how important that is to an ag state like Arkansas. And notwithstanding all of that, they say, "That's okay, we'd rather have a Republican up there than a chairman of an ag committee." And so that really, really showed how deep the sentiment, the conservative philosophy had come through our state. And you know, before you had to persuade them that there's a difference, you know, and you can't vote Democrat and

expect conservative governance. You didn't have to educate them anymore during that time frame. They knew it instinctively, and they knew Republicans stood for conservative philosophy, and the Democrats went a different direction. You couldn't hide from it.

[00:36:15] JD: So you're sworn into office in January of 2015 as governor of the state of Arkansas, and your party also, at that point, has supermajorities in the General Assembly. And that's a historically unique time, to see Republicans in such a dominating position in state politics. It's a situation that Democrats had enjoyed a few decades prior to that for a very long time. And I know this is a tricky question, perhaps, but how do you think—other than obvious policy differences, do you think there's a difference in the way that Republicans govern a state with supermajority status as opposed to what we may have seen with Democrats in the past? The Democratic Party for so long had been identified as a party that almost wasn't a party, that was built more about personality and less about policy, perhaps. Do we see differences in the Republican party in that regard? Or does the party struggle even today with some of those same sort of intraparty struggles that a party that's so dominant will sometimes see?

[00:37:24] AH: Well, you gotta separate those two. I mean, one on the governance side, significant, huge differences between Democratic governance and Republican governance at the state level. And so I came in in 2015, the first time in history that we had Republicans control both the House, Senate, General Assembly, as well as the governorship. And it was almost startling to understand what had not been done in the past. For example, every year for 100 years, our department of finance would forecast what the revenues would be, and then every dime of that would be budgeted and spent. That happened for 100 years. And you had to scratch your head and say, "Well, where's our savings account? Where's our reserve front?" Other states had built up reserve funds to weather through an economic downturn, but we hadn't. [00:38:29] And so under Republican governance, we started building that savings account, that reserve fund, that over a period of time is over half a billion dollars now. And which helps in bond ratings. And that had not been done for 100 years. The income tax in Arkansas had moved up to a 7 percent level under Democratic leadership, and for the first time in history, under Republican leadership, we started lowering it. And it's now been lowered from 7 percent down to 5.9 percent, and there's a unity of opinion that we need

to do more. And so that's a shift in historic directions.

[00:39:13] But also in terms of the structure of government itself, the Democratic party and leadership saw that as plum assignments. Let's put everybody who worked in the political campaign in government employment somewhere. With—under govern—Republican leadership, we've reduced state employment by over 1,500 employees. And that's a time our state is growing, our services expand, but state agency employees have been—have decreased by 1,500. And just to have the mindset of the executive officers that lead these agencies—how can you save money? How can you do things more efficiently? They had never been discussed and preached and made an integral part of governing. So those are just a couple of the differences.

Obviously, we pass a lot more conservative legislation in terms of regulations and pro-life, but fundamentally, those things I point to are the reduction in taxes, increased savings account, reducing state employment—those are fundamental differences.

[00:40:33] JD: I think that really hit the nail on the head was the idea that, you know, you can sort of separate the governing part from the policy part, and it sounds like that's—you know, thematically we're seeing significant changes. One thing, and this is not even tied to one party, but one thing we saw in

Arkansas was, you know, a lot of the political fights that we would see in Arkansas political history were among Democrats against other Democrats, mainly because they were largely the only people in the room. As we get to a more Republican dominated state, do you think we'll see more of that in the Republican ranks as well, where you're just going to see just the sheer number of Republicans sort of fighting amongst themselves, competing amongst themselves more so than even really looking at the Democrats?

[00:41:22] AH: Sure, absolutely. And I hope fighting is not the right word. It's gonna be contested primaries. It's gonna be competition to win the next office or position yourself for it, and we see that now. The hotly contested races is gonna be on the Republican side in the upcoming elections. Both lieutenant governor, governorship, AG—you've got different candidates. And so there's gonna be hotly contested races, just like the Democrats did. And the Democrats—one of the reasons they lost the majority is philosophy and, you know, national politics. But the other reason is that they built their party and they continued the strength of their party based upon personalities and the strength of their big names and their name ID out there versus the structure of the party. And so the Republicans, the

time we took over, we had strong county committees, people were committed, we had women's clubs, and they were much stronger than on the Democratic apparatus side. And so to me the test of the Republican Party is sure we're gonna have dominant personalities, we're gonna have contested primaries, but you cannot lose the framework of elections and the party structure and the importance of that. And that is the biggest risk to the Republican Party, that we continue the strength of that, and we do not just simply let that go to the most extreme elements of our party. And so you don't want—we have to be a party of ideas, we have to debate ideas, and we cannot simply become ideologues in our party structure, and that will weaken it over time.

[00:43:18] JD: I'm glad you touched on the organizational factors, the recruiting down from the county level to municipality level, in many cases, where we've seen Republicans make significant gains. And it wasn't always top down because as we've discussed, Arkansans have long supported more conservative executive leadership out of DC. It's just taken a while to get down to the lower levels of the ticket. If you had to think about what we've discussed and just sort of your time as a very active member of the Republican Party of Arkansas, as an elected

official, as a party official, as a litigator in some of those— particularly in the primary case—is there something we're missing? So if you were to put together this narrative and particularly paying attention from, say, 2005 to 2015, and we're tryin' to put all these pieces together to kinda put together a real, factually based picture of the Republican Party and how it became the juggernaut that it is today in Arkansas, what are we missing?

[00:44:26] AH: I'd say the only thing that we haven't talked about and that's always an important element is, in fact, the strength of the candidates themselves. And you cannot win races if you do not have somebody who's qualified and the people have confidence in. Mike Huckabee is a good example. He was a candidate that connected with people, and his personality helped get him elected, reelected numerous times and helped him to govern. People just simply liked Mike Huckabee. And you know, you've had that true on the Democratic side as well through history, very personable candidates that retail politics. Well, we have got key personalities. Again, Mike Huckabee, the strength of that, but you also have myself, and I think I could be defined as perseverance, that people learn to respect that I fought for decades and decades to build the Republican Party, and

sometimes it was through personal sacrifice of losing a race, multiple races. And yet I—they respected me. I stuck with it, and they had confidence that I could govern. They saw my performance in Congress as United States Attorney, and so sort of like Phil Mickelson, you know, it's—you can't consider failure as the end result. You see it as a learning opportunity. And so the strength of Mike Huckabee and myself, and you look at Tom Cotton, you know, his military record that he won and the strength of his personality has made a difference. You look at John Boozman, sort of the Hammerschmidt model of service. The most important thing is the constituent service that has that level of respect for him. And so you can't ever underestimate the strength and the importance of the character, the personality, and how in Arkansas, people still have to identify and trust that candidate, and we've been able to offer that on the Republican side.

[00:46:42] JD: Governor, thank you so much, from myself, but also on behalf of the Pryor Center for sitting down with us today and sharing with us your very rich knowledge and experiences in the Republican Party of Arkansas, seeing it from earlier eras all the way to today where, you said, as the state's chief executive with the General Assembly that is certainly a supermajority



significantly governed under Republican rule and a party that continues to still be on the rise as we're talking today. Thank you very much for your time.

AH: Thank you. It's great to be with you, and thanks for this opportunity.

[End of interview 00:47:40]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]