

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

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Blue to Red

Skip Rutherford

Interviewed by John C. Davis

December 17, 2020

Little Rock, Arkansas

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- 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.

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John C. Davis interviewed Skip Rutherford on December 17, 2020, in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

[00:00:00]

John C. Davis: Here with me today is Skip Rutherford, dean of the Clinton School of Public Service, a native Arkansan, lifelong Arkansan, has devoted much of his life to public service in the interest of politics and state government in many different facets through the years. And he's also an encyclopedia of Arkansas in many ways. On behalf of the Pryor Center, the University of Arkansas, and myself, thank you very much for sitting down with me today and discussing this topic.

Skip Rutherford: John, thanks. And obviously I'm a huge fan of the Pryor Center, of David and Barbara Pryor. What a great gift that is for Arkansas and the study of history, particularly Arkansas political history and journalism history. The Pryor Center is just a real treasure, so I'm honored to be here.

[00:00:54] JD: Thank you. The Pryor Center's study on this topic is to primarily focus on the last ten to fifteen years, so roughly twenty—2005 to 2015 all the way up to 2020 and looking at that pivotal time period in Arkansas's recent history where we have seen truly historic change in party identification, but also the general assembly majority status changing in really a

groundswell of Republican support that we have not seen since Reconstruction. And so what I've done is I've proposed that there's essentially three generations of the modern Republican Party in Arkansas, beginning in 1966 with Winthrop Rockefeller. In [19]66, Rockefeller has a successful bid for governor, which was at the time—since Reconstruction had been unprecedented. He's also able to have some coattails that also permits a lieutenant governor for the first time in that office since Reconstruction as a Republican. And then also we have John Paul Hammerschmidt in [19]66, who wins. He goes on to secure that seat for decades. [00:02:10] I propose that the end of that generation really occurs in 1992. During that period, you have Frank White, who succeeds in beating a young Bill Clinton after his first term. But really, with exception to that, you don't see a lot of long-term success with the Republican Party in Arkansas. You don't really see dramatic shifts in the general assembly by any means. And even recruitment tails off after the Rockefeller years to where you'll occasionally have maybe a strong gubernatorial candidate running, maybe a Sheffield Nelson or something, but with exception of that and a few moments with Ed Bethune in central Arkansas, you don't see sustained success for the party. And in 1992 is when, of course,

we see Arkansas's native son become president of the United States. And with that, he may or may not have taken some talent with him and sort of changed the dynamics of—the dynamic Democratic Party leadership in the state. All the while also we have a person with Huckabee, who has a failed US Senate bid, takes his machinery, and puts it right in towards a lieutenant governor's bid. And really no one at that time knew that he would rather quickly, in relatively short order, in a few years, ascend to governor under controversial circumstances. I propose that this period, the second period, ends in 2010, roughly, to where we are today in the third generation, where we see, again, these not only majorities but supermajorities of the legislative leadership and Republicans. We have a full slate of constitutional officers from the governor down that are Republican. All four House seats, two Senate seats, of course, are Republican. So with that in mind—I just kind of wanted to frame this with sort of where we are in this project. Skip, what was your earliest political memory in Arkansas?

[00:04:06] SR: John, it's interesting because as you outlined that, I was thinking about my earliest memories. And my earliest memories that I can recall in Arkansas, although I spent the summers as a kid in my—home of my grandmother and great-

grandmother in Batesville, Mississippi. And that's where I really—my grandmo [SR edit: grandmother]—my great-grandmother, though, you know, at her time in her eighties, she and I would sit in a rocking chair, and we'd talk about politics. And so I really became infatuated with politics as a kid listening to my great-grandmother talk about how important it was to participate in the system. And I started following politics. I started reading the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* as well as the *Arkansas Democrat* and *Arkansas Gazette*. And so as a kid, I was really, really interested. [00:05:13] In Arkansas, my first recollection of politics was, I guess probably—oh, I was probably eight, nine, ten. I would go to the—on election night to the Independence County courthouse in Batesville, Arkansas, where election returns were posted. And I remember election nights and the spirit of election nights and seeing candidates come to town and ride in the White River Water carnival parade and speak at fish fries. And I just was fascinated by all this. And then ultimately I had friends, including one guy by the name of John Davis, who ran for sheriff in Independence County, and others who were family friends that ran, that I followed it with great interest. So those are my earliest memories in Arkansas from—as a kid. Now as I got older, in high school I started

volunteering as a Young Arkansan for Rockefeller. It was a real interesting time because Rockefeller was taking on Faubus. My grandfather was director of the employment security division in Batesville, which was at that time, I believe, a patronage job or close to it, and I was—his grandson was out there campaigning for Winthrop Rockefeller. And I would volunteer at the Rockefeller headquarters and get involved. So my first real personal activity was for governor—candidate and then Governor Winthrop Rockefeller.

[00:07:05] JD: Do you recall at that time your perception of Democratic Party and Republican Party politics? Going further back before this time period where you're probably referencing, V. O. Key writes this book on Southern politics in 1949, where in Arkansas he sees the one-party system in its most undefiled form, as he puts it so eloquently. What was your perception of the two parties in Arkansas in the 1960s and . . .

SR: Well, I think that's a good question. And I also think, John, that I'm glad you brought up V. O. Key because I think you've gotta go back to set the stage of the 1960s in Arkansas to take a look at the late 1940s and the 1950s. And one of the things that happened, which completely dominated politics and was, I think, was and is the main factor in the shift from Democrat to

Republican, which is race. I think race is the key factor.

[00:08:13] So I would argue—I would go back and say that, you know, in 1956 when Amendment 44 was passed and Arkansas said, "We're gonna do everything in our power to thwart *Brown v. Board* and stop it." And then the entire Arkansas delegation, all Democrats by the way, signed the Southern Manifesto. And so the Democratic Party wa—an African American wasn't—didn't attend the Democratic Convention until 1924. I mean, the Democratic Party was the party of the Southern whites, and the Republican Party was the progressive party. The Abraham Lincolns, the Winthrop Rockefellers, the Ed Bethunes at the time. These were more, much more progressive. John Paul Hammerschmidt compared to the Democrats was quite progressive. And so my perception was that the Democratic Party was the party of white supremacy and white privilege and white advantage, and the Republican Party was the party of change, of open ideas, of inclusiveness.

[00:09:31] Now that changed in [19]64. That changed when LBJ did the National Civil Rights Movement, the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, that changed. And you saw it in Arkansas, which gets to the Rockefeller era. You saw it in Arkansas. In 1964 Arkansas voted 56 percent for the

Democratic nominee for president. In 1968, the fundamental shift of voting rights, civil rights—in 1968, the percentage of vote for the Democratic nominee for president, Hubert Humphrey, was 30 percent, 39 for Wallace, 31 for Nixon, 30 for Humphrey. I would contend that that 30 percent that Hubert Humphrey got in 1968 is reflective of the same percent that Hillary Clinton got in 2016 and Joe Biden got in 2020, in the 30 to 33 percent range. And because of that, we saw Arkansas on a national level shift and shift quickly. [00:10:56] You—we talk about a monumental shift between 2010 and 2012. The monumental shift occurred between 1964 and 1968, when all of a sudden Arkansas went from voting 56 Democrat to 30 percent Democrat. Wallace and Nixon got 70 percent of the vote in Arkansas, comparable to what Donald Trump got or received in 2020. Arkansas—you know, in 1966 Winthrop Rockefeller—but again, it was a local race. It was a statewide race. It wasn't a national race. Rockefeller won again in [19]68. You know, Fulbright won, Wallace won, Rockefeller won in that strange election where you couldn't figure out who Arkansas was. Well, I don't think Arkansas, John, knew who it was politically. I think Arkansas was going through a transformation, and it went first on the national level. But Arkansas was pretty good about—

Fulbright was good at it, followed by Bumpers good at it, followed by Pryor good at it, followed by Clinton good at it, followed by Tucker good at it, followed by Beebe good at it, which was separating themselves from the national party. And so we were the—you know, "I'm an Arkansas Democrat. Arkansas comes first." So Arkansas withstood that. But the trends were there. I mean, the groundwork was there. What was missing was the mechanism that transferred, "It's okay for me to vote for a Republican for president. How do I get that into voting for a Republican for governor?" [00:12:44] You pointed out John Paul Hammerschmidt, 1966. That district has been one party for fifty-four years. Remember when the Republicans ran against the—you know, we're a one-party state. Well, quite frankly, we are a one-party state in the 3rd District and have been for fifty-four years. I mean, so Republicans maintained a strong avenue of support, which through Hammerschmidt and being able to hire people, being able to bring college students to Washington, helped develop a Republican farm team. It was a base. Arkansas has no way now to develop a Democratic farm team. Mississippi has a way to develop a Democratic farm team because you've got Bennie Thompson's district, and so there are—but Arkansas now has no way to develop a congressional

farm team. So we get there, and Rockefeller does—you know, really sets the tone for—and again, he brought people like Ed Bethune and others into the mix. You gotta give him a lot of credit. I thought he was a good governor. You know, I—pardoning people on death row as the last act as governor. You probably won't see that in the Republican Party of today. But with the emergence of Dale Bumpers and then David Pryor and Bill Clinton, the Big Three—the Big Three were able to offset this, "I'm voting Republican nationally, but I like you locally." Because Arkansas was personal. Politics was very personal in Arkansas. People knew their politicians by their first name. Bumpers, Pryor, Clinton were great retail politicians. You know, they were really good one on one, and people liked 'em. But there were trends that made that change as well.

[00:15:02] JD: Diane Blair suggests that in a publication in the mid-1990s where she talks about the Big Three in Bumpers, Pryor and Clinton. How did they, as she suggested, stem the tide of GOP gains, at least in the last quarter of the twentieth century?

SR: Well, they were all effective communicators. Again, they were able to—people in Arkansas knew them. They were home a lot. They campaigned a lot. They were—they showed up at fish fries. I traveled the state for several years with David Pryor. I

can tell you he stayed in touch with Arkansans. So did Dale Bumpers, and so did Bill Clinton. So I think the way they were able to stem the tide was to say, "You know me, I'm Dale, I'm David, I'm Bill, and you can call me by my first name." And, "Yeah, we like you. Now we're gonna vote, nationally, we're gonna vote Republican," until Clinton in [19]92, which shows you they still like him. But it was the personality of the three. It was their strong personalities, their ability to get along with people that I think made the difference.

[00:16:27] JD: Tell me about your experience with the Clinton campaign in 1992. Sort of take us back to that era in Arkansas politics.

SR: Well, I—well, let me take you back to—the fundamental shift, the first one, was [19]64 to [19]68. That's when Arkansas was able to say, "Okay, it's okay to vote for a Republican." That was the year. The next fundamental shift, John, was in 1990, which was the election that changed the course of Arkansas history, and that was a Republican primary between Tommy Robinson and Sheffield Nelson for governor. A lot of people don't reflect on that primary as much as they should in terms of building the Republican Party in Arkansas. Because first of all, you had two very prominent people shift from Democrat to Republican to run.

Sheffield Nelson, a talented, smart guy, good businessman.

Tommy Robinson, sheriff, politician. But in that election, Tommy Robinson was Donald Trump before Donald Trump. And had Tommy Robinson defeated Sheffield Nelson in the 1990 Republican gubernatorial primary, there would be a very good chance that he would've defeated Bill Clinton in the 1990 general election. And that was because Tommy Robinson would've done the second big transformation. And that was to get county judges, the legislators, the county sheriffs to vote for him, which would've been the first time someone said, "Well, okay, I can vote for Ronald Reagan, but I gotta vote for Bill Clinton, or I gotta vote for David Pryor, or I gotta vote for Dale Bumpers."

[00:18:34] Had Tommy Robinson beaten Sheffield Nelson, you know, Drew County, Lincoln County, Independence County, there would've been a lot of people that would have said, you know, "I'm gonna vote for Tommy Robinson." Because he had the unique—he had a very unique factor in that Tommy Robinson would say on television what people said to the television. They agreed with him. They would've voted. It wouldn't have shown up in the polls, just like Donald Trump. Robinson preceded Trump by thirty years, and had he won, this transformation that we talk about, the Big Three, it would've been blockaded. And I

contend that the state would've moved Republican a lot more quickly. People would've switched parties, elected officials would start running as Republicans. People would be afraid to be against Robinson because he would campaign against them. All too familiar with what you see in 2020 with Trump. [00:19:51] So what happened was is that a bunch of us, myself included, organized a crossover campaign to stop Robinson in the primary. And it was a quiet crossover campaign that was working at the grassroots. 'Cause when—at the time, the Republican vote in the primaries was small. And you could, you know, you—there's no party identification in Arkansas. You can go in and say which party, which primary you wanna vote in and vote in any one of them. So we were working on that. I was working on it. I was telling all my friends to go in and vote in the Republican Primary. Stop Robinson. But when John Brummett wrote a column, which I think may be the most significant political column in terms of Arkansas history in modern history—when John wrote that column and basically said, "Hold your nose, cross over, and vote for Sheffield Nelson." And he legitimized it. And for all the grassroots stuff we were doing, Brummett gave it public credibility. And it got so bad that about seventy-two hours before the election, or forty-eight hours, my phone rang. It was

Clinton, and he said, "I hear from everybody that you're telling everybody to vote in the Republican primary and vote for Sheffield Nelson." And I said, "Well, that's true." And he said, "That's terrible. You know, I think I could beat Robinson easier than I could beat Nelson." And I said, "Governor, with the highest respect, I don't think that's right." I said, "I don't think you've seen the wrath of Tommy Robinson and the stunts that he will pull. And his—you know, he chained prisoners to fences. I mean this guy"—and he—and I said, "He's good. I mean, I respect him. I mean, I don't agree with him politically, but I respect him." I said, "You don't need to face him in November. We need to knock him off right now. We need to beat him in the primary. And the way—we got a Republican primary to do it, and we just gotta get people over." "I think it's the worst idea. Even—you know, you're gonna get me in a runoff because all my friends are voting in the Republican—everybody I talked to is voting in the Republican primary." I said, "Good." And then of course, when Sheffield beat Robinson, the Stephens family, which was very big behind Robinson, shifted and supported Clinton against Sheffield Nelson, which thwarted the rise of the Republican Party and basically said, "Okay, Clinton's elected, and we're gonna help—we are gonna help him." So again, that had

been thwarted. But Robinson really could have changed course of history. [00:23:00] Now, the other thing in that election is that that was an election—in addition to Clinton defeating Nelson in November—also on the ballot in that election, John, was the repeal of Amendment 44, which had been passed in 1956. And that amendment says—you know, it's still in the books—we're gonna thwart school desegregation. We're gonna do everything in our power to halt *Brown v Board*. And Arkansas needed to get that off the books because there was a Little Rock school-discrimination case about the state had, you know, promoted segregation, and how could you argue with that with that law right there on the books? The vote to repeal that was 51–49. There had been a seven point swing from 56–44 for to 51–49 against in thirty-four years. So when I looked at those numbers—I looked at those numbers, and I thought, "The shift's there. It—we thwarted it by stopping Robinson. But the shift is there. It's not a matter of if, it's a matter of when." [00:24:29] And then Clinton runs for president. And I remember he had a group at the mansion, Governor's Mansion, talking about runnin' for president. He asked me what I thought, and I said, "Well, that's the stupidest idea I've ever heard in my life. You know, you can't win. There's nobody from Arkansas, and you can't

raise the money." And it shows you my great political skills. But Clinton again thwarted the movement because he—Arkansans went back. Now 30 percent in 1968 had voted Democrat, 56 percent in [19]64. Clinton got 52, 53, something like that. Not to the levels LBJ got, I don't—I'm not sure exact—can't remember the exact number, but in that range. But Arkansas took a temporary detour and went back and voted for a Democrat for president, a favorite son. That quickly shifted in 2000 when Arkansas did not vote for Al Gore and hasn't voted for a Democrat since. The Clinton presidential campaign was one that was based on a lot of energy, a lot of excitement. Clinton was a change agent. And when America is in a mood for change—and we saw it with Jimmy Carter, we saw it with Ronald Reagan, we saw it with Bill Clinton, we saw it with George W. Bush, we saw it with Barack Obama, we saw it with Donald Trump, and to a certain degree we saw it with Joe Biden, though America was not so much about change as it was about stability and normalcy, and everybody wanted to just take a four-year deep breath and, you know, feel like that it was okay to be civil again. But Clinton's election in [19]92 thwarted the Republican rise.

[00:26:44] JD: Some have suggested, even in this project, some

have suggested that Governor Clinton's presidential win and ascendance to DC took some of the Democratic talent and resources outside of the state, and that the Republican Party, still very much a consistent second party in a one-party system, more or less, at that time was able to take advantage of this. But what is your take on that?

SR: You know, I've heard the theory. I don't buy into it. I mean, I think he took a lot of talent and gave some people some incredible opportunities, many of whom have come back and have made some incredible contributions to the state. I think what happened, John, was again, things were changing. When you look at what has happened—Bill Clinton probably could not carry Arkansas today, but Ronald Reagan couldn't carry California, and Richard Nixon couldn't carry California.

[00:27:56] What happened was, in this particular time, which was again, I think the third big shift, was that Arkansas moved from what I call the SEC Conference to the Big 12. When you saw in the South becoming more diverse, Arkansas became less diverse. In 1910, Arkansas's African American population was about 28 percent. In 1960 it was 22 percent. 2010, it's about 15 percent. So while other states became more diverse, Arkansas became less like Georgia, less like Florida, less like

Virginia, and more like Kansas and Nebraska. We became the Big 12 in politics where you're dominated in large part by white voters. So the demographic shift of more whites, less diverse, the movement, the growth of north Arkansas, Northwest and north Arkansas, when people moved from the Chicago and the St. Louis and the Kansas City suburbs to the hill country of Arkansas, bringing Republicanism with them, Bella Vista, all—Cherokee Village. We could go down the list, Mountain Home, we could go down the list, Harrison, Batesville. So you had this movement in—of the growth of Arkansas, and then you had the declining Black population in the state, and therefore what it translated into was that Arkansas had become Midwestern.

Virginia and Georgia are competitive. Arkansas is not.

[00:30:28] JD: That's interesting. So this probably won't be spun into the recording, but I just think it fascinating. So two things there. I had never thought about the [19]90 GOP primary in that way.

SR: Huge.

JD: Huge, huge. Exactly. And then also Doyle Webb sat in this seat a couple of hours ago and said pretty much the same thing, that we—he's always seen us more as a Midwestern state politically than a Southern state. So anyway, just interesting.

SR: Now I think for—I mean, I think we wanna think of ourselves as the South. We were, you know, we were one of the last states to join the Confederacy. We're really on the outer South, but we're moving more and more to the Midwest, and we're seeing it more as the sons and the daughters of people in the Delta are leaving the Delta.

JD: Right.

SR: And you're seeing concentration areas of Jonesboro and Paragould, but you're seeing a lot of farm families move to where their grandchildren are, you know, in Fayetteville or Bentonville or Mountain Home on the lake.

[00:31:36] JD: Certainly. Moving ahead a little bit to this more recent change in party loyalty in Arkansas where we don't have Big Three, where we don't have sort of the strategic gamesmanship of the electorate, or maybe those in campaigns such as the [19]90 GOP primary you touched on earlier. When we start to see this change, what do you recall was the reaction from members of the milit—of the media, party elites, politicians, et cetera at that time? So going back about ten years or so. The reason why I ask this is Roby Brock said—he had a little story about when he started releasing polls leading up to that 2010 election, that even he didn't believe 'em at first, right. And

he knew the methodology was sound, but he felt kind of squeamish sending them out there because immediately people would either pounce on 'em and say they're bad, the methodology's off, or they would just say, "Oh, there's just no way. There's no way this is true" . . .

SR: Yeah.

JD: . . . "for Arkansas." So can you take us back? What was the reaction from people at that time?

[00:32:46] SR: Well, as I recall looking back on that, you have to remember that Mike Beebe carried every county in Arkansas in his reelection bid. So again, you had this, "Well, how can we be moving Republican when Mike Beebe carries every county in the state?" Which is pretty significant. I mean, no other Democrat had done that. And so you know, you look back, and you think, "Wow." And then in 2012, the Republicans gained control of the legislature. You have to look back and realize that Asa Hutchinson lost three statewide elections. He lost for Senate, he lost for AG, and he lost for governor. Now he was elected in the safe 3rd Congressional District, but he lost three statewide. So this transformation, which took place pretty, you know, dramatically and in large numbers, again, I think some people were saying, "Well, how is it that a Democratic governor like

Beebe can carry every county and then the Democrats lose at the local level?" And I go back to the same thing is people liked Mike Beebe. He was a personality. People knew him. He was steady. Republicans voted for him. He made a very big attempt not to get—be overly partisan. But he was at the end of the last of the Democrats. You know, he rode the final wave that—he was the last, and he rode that final wave and went off to retirement. [*Rustling sound*] People said to him, "You ought to run for something else." And Beebe said, "No, I'm going home. I'm retiring." And I think not only was it the right personal decision, but given Arkansas changing, it's probably the right political decision because it was the last wave.

JD: I'm gonna stop there for just a moment. I notice the sun's getting on you.

[Recording stopped]

[00:35:04] JD: The 2012 and 2014 election cycles were incredible historic feats for Republicans in the state, going from a minority party losing every county in the gubernatorial contest in 2012, as you said, to then by 2012 and [20]14, winning majorities in both state legislative chambers, a sweep of constitutional offices and so on. Can you point to one or two races during that [20]12–14 cycle where you really think that set the tone for this

dramatic shift? One or two races where you said, "Well, if that race is won in that way, that means we're going to see this dramatic, not just majority but supermajority shift in the general assembly?"

[00:35:49] SR: Well, I think the Asa Hutchinson victory over Mike Ross in 2014 was really telling. Because I think that you had a very strong Democratic candidate that could have won that race under normal circumstances. So I think that was really—that's when I really thought that, "Okay, you know, this is the real deal, and this is where—that the shift has occurred." Then you saw the congressional seats, and you saw, you know, Vic Snyder leaving Congress, and you realize that—and at the state legislative level and at the other levels. Now again, factoring in this thing, of course, you've gotta get in the middle of this was the election of Barack Obama. And it goes back to the race issue. I look at this period, John, as, you know, again, it's hard to—I mean, it's hard to just say what happened in 2014 and 2012 on its own. I look at a fifty-year analysis of it as shifts and deterrents. And you—when you read Kevin Phillips' book of 1969, *The Emerging Republican Majority*, which I think basically laid out how you were gonna transform Southern Democrats into Southern Republicans, which was "We're gonna make this the

party of white people." And that was basically where he was going. And you bookend that with the great book of *The Long Southern Strategy* by Dr. Angie Maxwell and Dean Todd Shields, which basically says that was right, but we also are gonna add some other factors in there, and that is anti-feminism and religious conservatism. And so what you had show up in 2008 resulting in two—you know, I mean, Barack Obama came to Little Rock to campaign for Beebe at one point. They were together. [00:38:19] But as you saw that develop, then you realized that this state, the combination of race, the combination of anti-feminism, the combination of religious conservative viewpoints all coalesced into a grassroots effort that you've gotta give a lot of credit to the organizational skills of Doyle Webb and others in the Arkansas Republican Party. Virginia started voting Democratic after many years of organization. Georgia started voting Democratic after many years of organization. So give organization credit too. It wasn't all—I mean, the Republicans have been organizing for a long time. But their—demographics played a big, big role in it, race played a big, big role in it, and then recruiting candidates played a big, big role in it. All of that led to what was and what is a solidly red state right now.

[00:39:36] JD: Looking ahead ten, twenty years, given where we

are right now, what do you think we're gonna look like in terms of party politics in the state of Arkansas?

SR: Well, if you look at 2016, the presidential election, and you'd look at 2020, the presidential election, the Democrats carried eight counties. That's a long way from Mike Beebe carrying seventy-five. But what you saw is very interesting. The City of Little Rock in 2016 voted 65 percent Clinton, Hillary Clinton, 30 percent Trump. You drive to Cabot, to Lonoke, to Bryant, you're gonna see a 60-point shift that voted 65–30 Trump. So you've got, in a city that is, at least in the 2010 census, 42 percent Black, probably more now, that—Democratic politics, whether they be running for county judge, county sheriff, state rep in most of the seats, not—far west area different, but most of the Little Rock seats. City board for the most part—a very solidly local—county clerk—very solidly Democratic bastion. And I think that remains for a long time. I think the Democrats will have a significant force in the largest county in Arkansas. [00:41:51] And then I think the second would be Jefferson County, where there is, again, a strong Democratic presence, largely, highly populated with Blacks. But two strong Democratic bastions where there will be room for Vivian Flowers, there will be room for Clarke Tucker and Will Bond and Joy Springer and Joyce

Elliott and others to still maintain political viability and political idealism. That's where the Democratic farm team is gonna come from. The other potential farm team areas are in—along the Delta from Crittenden down to Chicot, you've got, again, some pretty strong Democratic votes. Now does that translate into a statewide electorate? Probably not. But what that does translate into is that if Democratic—Democrats win on the national basis, on the national presidential election, then you've got a farm team of talent for appointments, for jobs, for patronage positions. So Arkansas, while the base is narrow, you have this—and when you look at the Little Rock vote, and I haven't studied the Biden/Trump vote in detail yet, but it's similar. [00:43:40] But when you look at the Clinton/Trump vote of 2016 in Little Rock, Hillary Clinton carried precincts at Pulaski Academy, at Second Presbyterian Church, and she carried a lot of precincts in West Little Rock. She didn't carry the far west, Chenal, but she carried a lot of precincts in West Little Rock, a lot of white voters. A lot of white voters in Little Rock voted for her. So there is a progressive element. You're see—you see it in Fayetteville, you see it with the state representatives. You see it with Greg Leding, you see a progressive element there. But you saw the defeat of Bruce

Maloch in south Arkansas by someone that people hardly knew other than he was a—had an R by his name. Bruce was a very moderate conservative Democrat, but the R by his name. And I've had a couple of friends who are progressives who tell me that they're interested in running for office, but they will probably have to run as a Republican to get elected. That's no different than people fifty years ago that said, "I've gotta run as a Democrat." So I don't see much change on the statewide level. I don't see much change. I do see areas of progressive leadership at the local level in these pockets.

[00:45:17] JD: So what I'm hearing, too, is that there appears to be, and the data I think bear this out, what we might call a growing urban-rural divide or suburban-rural-urban divide that we see in some other states as well. North Carolina comes to mind. You've mentioned Virginia. There seems to be these areas of somewhat centralized populations at varying levels of densities that you have pretty strong Democratic support, and then large, vast, but relatively less-populated ground around them that is overwhelming Republican. Is that where you think we're heading, where it's consolidating Democratic votes in central Arkansas, Pulaski County in particular, maybe Washington County, in places and in pockets in Northwest

Arkansas, and then most of your rural areas that still at lower levels still have that sort of Democratic tradition that seems to be waning, those becoming even redder. Is that sort of where you think we're heading in ten years, twenty years?

[00:46:31] SR: Yeah, I do. Except when you define urban in Arkansas, it's still rural. *[JD laughs]* You know, I mean, so we don't have an Atlanta or a Charlotte. We don't have a Philadelphia. We, you know—our urban, by many cases, is still relatively rural. What we do have, I think, is we—where there are concentrations of minority voters and where there are concentrations of higher education, you have opportunities for Democratic growth. The one that you have to—the one to watch over the next ten years is what happens in Bentonville with the arts, the Walton influence. The—you know, you—the younger Waltons seem to be much more progressive and open-minded politically than some of the other Waltons. So you know, Bentonville's one to watch. But I don't see—you're right on the urban-rural divide. And Trump actually did better with rural voters in 2020 than he did in 2016. But I don't think that is gonna be much of a factor in Arkansas. I think the Arkansas Democratic base centers largely around the Little Rock community, where a lot of people in Little Rock, a lot of

progressive whites are, you know, very comfortable living in a diverse environment. They like it. That's fine with them. And I think what you're seeing in Fayetteville is the influence of the University of Arkansas.

[00:48:38] JD: Very good. Well, very insightful, as always. Very insightful perspectives from a person who has seen firsthand this dramatic shift, has played his own role in the political history of the state of Arkansas. Again, on behalf of the Pryor Center, thank you so much for sitting down and speaking with me today, Skip.

SR: Thank you, John. I think it's a great topic. Look forward to seeing the final product.

JD: Thank you.

[End of interview 00:49:20]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]