

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

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Blue to Red Oral History Project

Roby Brock
Interviewed by John C. Davis
October 13, 2020
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.

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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.

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John C. Davis interviewed Roby Brock on October 13, 2020, in Little Rock, Arkansas.

[00:00:00]

John C. Davis: Roby, thanks again. We know that you have some really valuable insights and perspectives for us on this, so we're excited to get to speak with you today.

Roby Brock: Yeah.

JD: Roby, what's your earliest political memory in Arkansas?

RB: Well, I can remember as a child probably about four years old—I don't think I would have been five yet 'cause it was the 1970 gubernatorial primary. And I can remember being with my parents up in Rector, Arkansas, up in cla—good old Clay County, and being nudged up to the front of a group of people at—I want to say we were at some maybe rodeo fairgrounds or something like that—and told to shake this man's hand. He's going to be the next governor of the State of Arkansas. And it was Dale Bumpers. And I still remember just the image. I don't remember any of the dialogue or anything, but I remember that image of a young Dale Bumpers staring at me, and me shaking his hand, and sure enough, he did become governor there. So that's my earliest memory of politics. Obviously, not involved in anything. [00:01:11] I remember, as a teenager in the late

[19]70s, I remember the epic US Senate race between David Pryor, Jim Guy Tucker, and Ray Thornton. Of course, that went into a runoff with David Pryor and Jim Guy Tucker. And I remember watching the TV commercials in that campaign 'cause I would have been maybe twelve or thirteen years old at the time. So not really heavily involved in politics, but paying attention to what was on TV. And I remember I really liked Jim Guy Tucker's smile for some [*laughs*] reason, just to prove the point that sometimes politics is just—you know, it's about personality versus, you know, issues. And I kind of kept up with Jim Guy Tucker's career all those years after he lost that race. Even though he fell out of politics, I still kept up with him in business. And ironically, as we'll probably talk about later, I came to work for him, but it—that was purely fate.

[00:02:07] JD: These are your early recollections of your first few run-ins with politicians in Arkansas. And then the other thing that jumps out at me is your remarks talking about a heated primary race and a runoff and not really much discussion on a two-party race for that position.

RB: No. [*Laughs*] I don't even know who the Republican was running in the 1978 Senate race. I'm sure someone out there does, but I have no recollection of even who that was. So yeah,

you know, I think that what you talked about, that retail pol— Arkansas is such a small state. And we say that all the time, but you really are about one degree of separation from someone if you don't know 'em directly. My family was not a very political family. We didn't—my mother and father weren't active in politics. They didn't—you know, they just—they never campaigned. They never showed me or told me what their political affiliation was. We just didn't talk politics at our house. That wasn't one of the things that we did. I kind of gravitated to it, I guess, 'cause of television and the fact that you couldn't miss it if you were a kid growing up in the [19]70s, you know, watching—and the [19]80s watching TV, you were going to be surrounded by politics. And certainly through school, you start paying more attention to things. [00:03:21] But I know as I kind of got into politics in my late teens, early twenties and got more active in things, it really surprised me just how—I don't say easy in a bad way, but just how easy it was to connect. I mean, it wasn't hard to get involved, you know. I think if you're in a big state like, you know, California or Texas or New York, it's a lot more difficult to find a way to get into statewide politics. I mean, I think you can start at the local level and work your way through. And some people with connections certainly have

ways to get involved in those bigger campaigns quicker. But in Arkansas, I mean, you could—when I was growing up, you could go to a campaign headquarters and volunteer your time for someone running for attorney general, somebody running for governor, or somebody running for Congress or Senate. And you were welcomed in. "Come on. You—we could use an extra set of hands. Put out some yard signs or help make some calls, or, you know, whatever needed to be done." There was always something kind of grassroots and physical and necessary to go, you know—or running errands or whatever it would be. That's Arkansas politics to me.

[00:04:37] JD: So growing up in the [19]70s and [19]80s, what was your perception of the sort of two-party politics in the state, of the Democrats and of the Republicans?

RB: Well, it was one-party politics for the most part. You did have—Ed Bethune kind of popped on the scene for a little bit there. Obviously Frank White had a term as Arkansas governor. And I actually remember more about that 'cause A: I was a little bit older. And as fate would have it, my grandparents on my father's side of the family, they were friends with Frank White. And so they were big Frank White supporters. I didn't have really a political affiliation at that time. As a matter of fact, I

probably leaned more Bill Clinton because I—he was young and, you know, it—he wasn't very long into his, you know, beginning of his political career. And that was pretty aspirational for a young person, you know, entering politics and thinking about politics. So I—you know, there just was—it wasn't super competitive. I didn't think of Arkansas as a two-party state. I didn't think of the Republican Party as being that big, whereas everywhere you went in Arkansas, you were gonna meet Democratic candidates and Democratic office holders. So you know, the Republican Party was pretty small back in that day.

[00:05:59] JD: Tell me about your experience in the Clinton campaign in [19]92.

RB: So I got hired on the Clinton campaign initially to just do some accounting work for them. That was very brief. It turned out they were going to transition me into a coordinate—being a coordinator of the watch-night party in downtown Little Rock in 1992. At the time, we didn't—you didn't want to jinx it and call it a victory party. And it was too early when I was hired to even call it that. But they knew that they were gonna have to plan for the world descending upon Little Rock, Arkansas, and broadcasting either an acceptance speech or, you know, a concession speech for Clinton. As kind of the time moved on in

that campaign in [19]92, it became a little more obvious. You know, Clinton did well in the debates, and he sparked a lead that—you know, it became pretty obvious for about the last five weeks of that campaign that he was gonna win or at least he was the odds-on favorite to win. And so we started planning for what we were going to do in Little Rock that night. It was a fun and exciting time. I mean, you talk [*laughs*] about something that you've—there's no blueprint to go figure out how to do this. "Hey, how do you plan for a presidential watch-night party in a candidate's hometown?" I mean, there's just—there's no playbook for that. So there was a group of us that convened of, you know, Skip Rutherford and some of the guys from Cranford, Johnson, Robinson, Woods, back in the day is what they—would have been—Jim Johnson and Wayne Cranford were pretty instrumental. And gosh, David Watkins from the Clinton campaign was there. We met pretty regularly to start planning for, you know, where would the VIP parties be? What did the Clinton and the campaign want for the, you know, the visual aesthetic on that night, you know, to broadcast to the world? Logistically, what had to happen from the Secret Service point of view? Logistically, what had to happen to be able to accommodate 225 satellite trucks, which is what we were

estimating were gonna come to the streets of downtown Little Rock to broadcast. There had to be electricity for all of that. There had to be fiber cable for all of that. And none of that stuff was really built out in terms of infrastructure. So there was party planning, but there was also logistical planning.

[00:08:29] And one of the things that I remember that was kind of my favorite is we needed crowd-control barriers. And so Little Rock didn't have bike racks back then, which were typically used to, you know, cordon off, you know, different places. So we had to get on the phone, and we call around to a couple of different municipalities like Memphis and Dallas. And we finally—in New Orleans we talked to the police department down there, and we find a willingness to rent us the several thousands of bike racks that we would need [*laughs*] to gate and do cap—crowd control on the night of the event. If you look at some old pictures, you might see an NOPD sign on the—for New Orleans Police Department on some of those bike racks. And I remember talking to the gentlemen in the New Orleans Police Department that would kind of manage their inventory. And we agreed, you know, how we were—how many, and how we were going to get them here, and I, you know, needed to pay him for them. And so I said, "Who do I send this check to? And who do

I make it out to?" And he said, "You need to make it out to cash." [*JD laughs*] And I was like, "No, that's not going to happen." [*Laughs*] Said, "Well, you can't fault a guy for tryin'." You know, typical Cajun accent there. And so, anyhow, I can't remember, it was a few thousand dollars, and we sent a check down there to the New Orleans Police Department. And they shipped them up here on a big old Ryder truck or some sort of moving van. And we unloaded them and used them, sent them back a couple weeks later. And but I just—that was a fun time. I mean, a once in a lifetime event, you know. Again, nothing to really go by in terms of how to plan for it. It was just figure stuff out as you go along and hope that you accommodated everything. And that night turned out to be a great night. It was kind of a chilly evening. But everybody remembers Clinton walking—and his family walking out on the Old State House lawn with the flags in the background and the, you know, the facade of the Old State House. I mean, it's an iconic American moment, and to have been a small part of that was actually just, you know, pretty thrilling.

[00:10:39] JD: Absolutely. So following election night 1992—much has been written about this, and there's been some speculation, so I'd like your perspective on it. We see dozens of young to

sort of mid-career Democratic potential candidates and talent in the state leave for DC to join the Clintons and the Clinton administration in [19]93. And there has been some speculation that this created an opportunity for Republicans to get their foot into the door, so to speak, especially at the state level. And of course, you have an emergency—or special election for lieutenant governor. Some years later, events that couldn't have been foreseen lead to Mike Huckabee ascending to the office of governor. But even before that time, looking at this era, [19]93, [19]94, I wonder if you have any insights into sort of how that may have potentially led to some gains among Republicans.

[00:11:42] RB: Yeah. Well, there was an exodus of Democratic talent to Washington, DC, like you said. I mean, think about Marion Berry went up there and eventually came back and ran for Congress as an example. But yeah, there were quite a few people that probably would've entered Arkansas politics at some point in time as candidates themselves. I don't know if it created a big opening for Republicans. Republicans, I think, in the [19]90s kind of found a special niche in special elections. They won some legislative races through special elections where the turnout is low. And if you get your base out and the

Democrats get their base out, it—they got a fighting chance. And that was really what the Mike Huckabee lieutenant governor's race versus Nate Coulter, the Democratic nominee, turned out to be. I remember watching the returns on that night. And when Benton County, a Republican stronghold at the time—I mean, it still is today, but back then it was—Benton County was the—that was Fort Knox [*laughs*] for Republican votes. When that came in and it gave Mike Huckabee, like, a 7,000-vote lead statewide, you were like, "I don't think Nate Coulter can come back from that." I mean, it just—it was the tipping point. And so Republicans figured out how to win in special elections in that way. [00:13:05] And I think that you didn't have a mass Republican kind of gain from all of that because Bill Clinton was still very strong here. He was the national guy, obvious—I mean, he was the president, so there was some pride in that for a lot of Arkansans. And still back at the local levels, at the county judge level, at the state legislative level, they all knew Bill Clinton. They all went to the White House. They all went to Washington, DC. If he ever came home, he wanted to see some of them. I mean, it was—there was still this culture that was very connected to Bill Clinton. And I think that that put up a little bit of a bridge, or a wall I should

say, to keep a Republican wave from really sweeping over Arkansas, unlike what we saw in other Southern states, you know, during the [19]90s when Newt Gingrich and the Contract for America really made some big gains for Republicans. It didn't—I mean, there were some successes for Republicans, but it just wasn't widespread. And it wasn't super long lasting, like what we see today.

[00:14:08] JD: You know, and I think that sort of reminds us that we have the first Republican governor since Reconstruction in Rockefeller. Runs in [19]64, loses. Wins in [19]66, gets reelected in [19]68. And we don't see a lot of Republican momentum behind those gains that he had personally . . .

RB: Right.

JD: . . . despite millions of his own dollars being invested into a party infrastructure and really creating sort of a modern version of the Republican Party of Arkansas. With exception of himself and John Paul Hammerschmidt in the River Valley, Northwest Arkansas congressional district region, we really don't see a lot of that longstanding success. And in fact, Rockefeller loses his third bid for governor in 1970. Hammerschmidt goes on to serve for decades in the House of Representatives. But with that being the exception, we don't see a lot of momentum coming out

of the [19]60s. [00:15:04] Then we look at Frank White, who switches parties to run against Governor Clinton, beats Clinton in 1980. And this is that beginning of time in Arkansas where Arkansas voters are favoring Republican candidates for president, especially those that aren't from Arkansas or aren't Southern-born Democrats. We see that the Frank White administration two-year term does not lead to that momentum that we might expect if we're looking ahead at sort of other models, particularly in other states in the South, as you mentioned. And then I think you did a great job of pointing out that in the 1990s, there were sort of fits and starts. Again, you start to see seeds being planted perhaps, but not a whole lot being really, really harvested there . . .

RB: Yeah.

JD: . . . in terms of Republican gains with exception of special elections, which you mentioned the Mike Huckabee . . .

[00:15:53] RB: Or Tim Hutchinson was—but again, he serves one term, and he gets beat. I mean, just like you said, fits and starts is the best description of that. There were—you know, Jay Dickey serves a couple of terms, and then Mike Ross takes him out. There just wasn't anything that was permanent about it.

[00:16:11] JD: So I'm curious—when we think of Governor

Huckabee's success in serving a considerable amount of time as governor, it seems that maybe his own sort of brand of Republicanism or the party being really tied up to his persona may or may not have led to party success down the road. What is your take on that?

[00:16:37] RB: Well, I think during that time, you had a big faction split in the Republican Party. You had the Huckabee wing of the party and the Hutchinson wing of the party, and they didn't always get along. I think probably Asa Hutchinson can tell you [*laughs*] more about that than I could 'cause that's some pretty inside baseball. But that was clear that—you know, they served—there were co-chairs at one time to satisfy both wings of the party, and it was already a small party to begin with. You know, I mean, that's the kind of lack of unity that was there at that time. And I think that held them back in some parts.

[00:17:12] But I think the thing that really kept the Republicans from making big gains at that time was still this—what I call this Clinton wall. I mean, there was still this cultural connection in the [19]90s with Bill Clinton up there. The economy was good, even though there were certainly, you know, scandals and trials and tribulations. There was still a—you know, it was on a—it was of a personal nature and not of a professional nature. And

again, with the nation in pretty good shape in terms of prosperity, you could be pretty proud to say, "That president's from my home state." And so I think there were a lot independent voters that felt that way about Clinton. I just think that kept the Republican party from making some bigger gains that other Southern states were seeing during that time.

[00:18:00] I think the other thing, too, is you just didn't have as much happening at the local level for Republicans to make gains. And that was kind of the farm club for Democrats coming up is there was always a county judge that moved to a legislator, and a legislator in, maybe, the House moves to the Senate, or maybe somebody comes into the Senate, and now they're a viable statewide candidate. I mean, there just was a lot of, you know, transition for the Democrats. They had a farm club. And the Republicans really—you know, a mile wide and an inch deep, you know, with their bench, basically. They just didn't have a lot, in part because they didn't have a lot of polling places at the time. We've talked about this before, but Asa Hutchinson led a federal lawsuit that he was successful with when he was the party chairman to make the state take over the election process. And that's why the state board of election commissioners today oversees the state's primaries and runoffs

and general elections. It used to be all funded by the political parties. And with the Democrats having all the filing fees and most of the candidates, they had the most polling places. So in every county there would be a place to go vote in the Democratic primary. And in some counties for the Republicans, there might be one polling place. Well, you're not going to elect very many people to office [*laughs*] if you can only cast ballots at one polling place, you know. And then when the general election would come around, the Democrats had so much more entrenched name recognition and you know, infrastructure that it just—it really limited Republicans. [00:19:42] Now it didn't happen overnight, but I do kind of look at that lawsuit and the fact that it equalized polling places for Republicans and Democrats as a way to allow more Republican candidates to be a choice for voters. I think that that did lead to some people, you know—if you didn't want to drive forty-five minutes to go vote, you just probably stayed at your local precinct and voted for a Democrat, you know. Now you've got a choice when you go to the ballot box to pick a primary to vote in. And if you lean Republican, you got choices at that point in time. So I think that that—that change in the law, I think, was a big catalyst for Republicans to make gains. It was a big seed that was planted

that paid off ten years down the road.

[00:20:30] JD: And I think it's important to point out—I believe the court of appeals finally heard that case and upheld the ruling in, I think it was, [19]94, [19]95. It hasn't been that long ago . . .

RB: Right.

JD: . . . since this has been going on. It's another good reminder that the rules of politics are made at—for elections are made at the state and local level by partisans. And if you are the party in power for 150 years, you have some advantage.

RB: Yeah.

JD: And if you're the other party, [*laughter*], the out party, you've got some challenges to deal with.

[00:21:01] RB: And I mean, I don't know all the history on how that all came to be, but that was an evolutionary process, I mean, over time. And again, just—it built tremendous momentum for Democrats to get elected, whether they were conservative Democrats or liberal Democrats or middle-of-the-road Democrats. I think most of them tended to be more conservative, which is where you have seen some swing that now they call themselves Republicans.

[00:21:28] JD: So going back a bit back to election night 1992—shortly thereafter, you began working in the Tucker

administration. And you do some legislative liaison work with the governor's administration and the state General Assembly. And I wonder if you could share your insight, your experience in regards to having a Democratic governor work with a very strongly Democratic General Assembly. And maybe also speak about any sort of factions or personalities or anything there that could have been more obvious to somebody in the inside, such as yourself.

[00:22:08] RB: So at that time in the legislature, you didn't have a monolithic Democratic party. There were definitely factions within the Democratic party. We talked a little bit earlier about the two factions in the Republican party that kinda came about during the Huckabee and in Hutchinson years there. For the Democrats, you had probably some inkling of national Democrats, which would tend to be a little bit more to the left of center. And for sure during this time period in the [19]90s, we're moving a little more in that direction. Probably not as fast because Bill Clinton was a New Deal, you know, Democrat and wanted to kind of keep things a little bit more middle of the road in terms of his policies. But that faction was still there. You had very conservative Democrats. I mean anti-abortion, for term limits, I mean, you know, just the—what we would describe as

Republicans, you know, now, in terms of some of the issues and policy positions that they had. But they were Democrats at that time. [00:23:19] And then you did have kind of a moderate, pragmatic Democrat that was a little blend of both; conservative on fiscal policies, probably open-minded on some of the social issues and how things were changing a bit during the day. So there was kind of—if you're a governor, and you're a Democratic governor, and you're working with a heavily supermajority Democratic legislature, it's not a cake walk [*laughs*], you know what I mean? You're still juggling a lot of stuff. [00:23:53] I would say that what people don't see that really changes that—a governor has a tremendous amount—first of all, they have a tremendous amount of personality. I mean, you can go, you know, Rockefeller, Bumpers, Pryor, even Frank White was a strong personality. Not as successful as some of the others. But Bill Clinton, Jim Guy Tucker, Mike Huckabee, Mike Beebe, Asa Hutchinson today, they all have really strong personalities. And you need that in the governor's office to persuade people to come your way. You're elected by the state as a whole. And these legislators are elected by a smaller portion of the state 'cause it's just their districts. And so that carries a lot of influence when a governor is using their powers of persuasion.

[00:24:39] The other thing is that a governor's got a lot of power. I mean, there's 10,000 appointments to boards and commissions, and I can assure you that every elected official wants to make sure that certain people from their district are rewarded with those appointments. And that carries a tremendous amount of weight when a governor wants you to vote some way, and you might have a different position on something. And then I think the other thing, too, is just the governor controls a lot of when money is released. The legislature technically controls the power of the purse. They control the budget. They set the budget. They pass the budget. But there are timing issues with when the revenue comes in and the state meets its forecast or doesn't. And the governor has a whole lot of latitude about when money is released for different things. And so that carries a lot of persuasion with legislators too, so the governor's got more ammunition than [*laughs*] a legislator does. [00:25:38] And so I think it doesn't matter, you know, what the political party is on a lot of issues. A governor's in a lot better-advantaged position to win their argument when they can say, "Well, I just might hold up that funding for another couple of months, if it's just not that big of a deal to you," you know, that—all of a sudden a legislator's like,

"No, we need that money now," you know. And that changes the dynamic. And so I have seen that a lot behind the scenes. I've seen it when I worked in government. I have seen that a lot in covering it. And knowing when some of that's in play—it doesn't come out publicly, but you can always kind of go knock on the door and go, "I'm thinking that something probably happened here. You want to tell me what went down 'cause this doesn't make a lot of sense?" And when you get the backstory, it does tend to make a lot of sense.

[00:26:34] JD: You mentioned term limits. Also in 1992 the state passes a term-limit amendment. It's later challenged in court. It's determined that the boundary of the effect of the term limits is reserved exclusively for the state legislature. I wonder, do you think there's anything to the idea that that also helped Republicans sort of prosper down the road?

RB: I definitely think it did. So because in some of these communities, you're gonna run out of leaders pretty quick. [Laughs] I mean, you know, there are some smaller legislative districts, particularly House districts, where you run through a couple of the chamber of commerce people, or a couple of prominent business people, or a couple of, you know, long-time elected officials. We saw a lot of people transition from, say,

county government or mayor to the legislature. And then you're gone in six years not to be heard from again. I mean, there's a lot of turnover there. And I do think that some point in time as the state changed politically and the national mood changed and we saw more of that national politics kind of get down to the local level and starting defining candidates and parties, because you had run through so many people that were term limited, it definitely, you know, caused the farm club for the Democrats to run out a lot sooner. [00:28:05] I remember, and I will forget names here, but I remember in that first wave of big-time term limits that came, there was a class of like—a freshmen class in the House of one hundred of like forty-seven or something like that. I mean, it was literally half of the class was first termers. And then when you looked at the next cycle, it was going to be like 70 percent were going to be in their first or second term. And then they were going to be gone after their third. And I remember somebody had filed an announcement to say that they were running to replace the term-limited John Smith. And I thought, "John Smith is term limited? I've never even heard of John Smith. He's been here six years, and I have been covering the legislature for six years. And I've never heard of this legislator who is term limited." He didn't—I can't remember his

name, I'm making up John Smith, but whatever his name was. He hadn't passed a bill. He hadn't filed a bill, hadn't passed a bill. I mean, he just literally had come down here and voted on bills and had gone back home and just never did anything except be a citizen legislator. And I thought, "Wow, I never even knew that person." [*Laughs*] I mean, how does that happen? But that's the power of term limits. I mean, it really changed things that dramatically, and had that kind of impact on the membership.

[00:29:31] JD: Your poll over the years has gained a reputation as being something of a political harbinger of sorts in Arkansas. What led to the creation of the poll?

RB: So back in 2009, 2010, there was not a ton of public polling here. And we were a younger media organization at the time. And it had become a lot more acceptable to do automated calls, robocalls as they're often referred to. And we started checking into the pricing of some of that and found that it was affordable enough to say, "Let's do a couple of these and see what happens." I wound up contacting Jay Barth at Hendrix College when he was professor of political science there and seeing if Hendrix wanted to partner with it from a political-science perspective. And they helped fund the poll, but everybody—it's

humorous to me. They think that we just poll people at Hendrix College for the Talk Business & Politics Hendrix College Poll. I'm like, no, it's statewide.

JD: Might introduce a little bias.

RB: I—you know. But anyhow, as a matter of fact, I had somebody tell me one time, "Could you poll some students from UALR at some point in time just to even it out some?" [*Laughs*] It's like, "You think we just poll Hendrix students? All right, let me explain to you polling works." [00:31:01] But anyhow, so there was a curiosity about it, and it was affordable enough to do it. And so we, you know, we started doing them, and we found some pretty early success in that. We did a couple of—you know, we did an early poll in 2009 and showed Blanche Lincoln in a lot of political trouble, which some subsequent polling came out and showed, you know, that she was. Just with a very low approval number. She was way under 50 percent in 2009. Then by the primary season in 2010, we put some polling out there, and it was remarkably accurate in terms of picking up trends and giving some previews of some things that actually did happen. For instance, we—if you'll remember in 2010, John Boozman got into the Senate race late as the Republican candidate. There had been at one time, I want to say twelve or thirteen, maybe

even fourteen people had announced for that Republican candidacy for the US Senate to challenge her. And by the time that Boozman got in, I think it had whittled its way down to maybe ten or eleven. And we put a poll out that showed that John Boozman was gonna win without a runoff by like 51 or 52 percent, which I found a little hard to believe. But we put it out there, and we got criticized, and he wound up winning by about 52 or 53 percent, so we were remarkably close in terms of predicting that he was way ahead. [00:32:35] I later found out that internal Republican polling was showing that—oh, Jim Holt was going to be the likely winner of that primary, and that the Republicans had done polling to see that that was going to happen. And they thought that was the one candidate that might not be able to beat Blanche Lincoln in the 2010 election cycle. So they recruited, I'm pretty sure, John Boozman to come get in this race. And their internal polling actually showed that he might win without a runoff as well. So you find that out after the fact, but it validates you and gives you some confidence that what you're doing is right. [00:33:12] Another story I remember from that 2010 election cycle is we showed Rick Crawford beating Chad Causey, the Democrat in that race. Rick Crawford, the Republican at the time, a no-name Republican

who had come from nowhere in 2010, really kind of won a low-key primary against one other opponent. We showed him with a sixteen-point lead over the Democrat Chad Causey in the summer of 2010. And I looked at the poll results and laughed and said, "We're not hanging this poll out. Not doing it." So we went out the next night with a new universe of voter sample. Same polling questions. We put it out in the field again. The next night it came back with Rick Crawford with a sixteen-point lead over [*laughs*] Chad Causey. And I was like, "Wow, there's something in the water. You know, 2010's going to be an upset year for Republicans." [00:34:11] And you could see signs of it. The Tea Party was evolving as a national force. Lots of dissatisfaction in Arkansas over the Affordable Care Act, Obamacare, lots of resentment about Obama in Arkansas. So we hung that poll out with the caveat that we polled it twice [*laughs*] and we got the same result. So believe it or don't believe it, but the Republican is up in the First Congressional District, despite a Republican not holding that seat since Reconstruction. Closer to Election Day, probably about two or three weeks out, we had Rick Crawford with an eight- or nine-point lead over Chad Causey. And he wound up winning by the reverse, whatever eight or nine points. So if we had him up by

eight, he won by nine. If we had him up by nine, he won by eight. So it was really pretty close. And so I think after that cycle, we had the confidence to say, "We're doing it right. And we understand what we're doing." And a lot's changed over the decade, but that's where we started. And that's what got us started was it was affordable. And we were getting good data off of it. I mean, we were really detecting trends about independent voters, who were breaking for Republicans two to one, three to one, four to one. We saw the dissatisfaction with the president and how it was translating to Arkansas Democratic candidates in a really big way.

[00:35:33] JD: I believe we were talking about how your poll had caught some of this shift on the early end. So you must have caught some fire from Democrats who were seeing this information for the first time.

RB: Yeah. Yeah, I mean, there was a lack of credulity about it. I mean, just quite frankly, I mean, I can't tell you how many people were like, "This is unprecedented. There's no way that this is happening. Your poll cannot possibly be right." And I mean, I'm not going to lie. I mean, there were, particularly in that 2010 cycle—I mean, it was—you know, you hoped you were right, you trusted your method, you trusted your data. You had

been right a few times before, but it still—it didn't feel right, but it's what the data was saying. So you gotta trust it that your—you know, that it's accurate and that it's correct. And the results of that year did wind up proving, you know, that we were right.

[00:36:41] For instance, we had Mike Beebe winning comfortably in 2010. We had Mike Ross winning comfortably in 2010 down in the Fourth Congressional District, when everywhere else you saw Democrats in trouble. And the fact that those two political figures did not have the same difficulties that other candidates were having, A, kind of led you to believe that your data was accurate. You know, well, people are drawing a distinction, you know. And then when you got the results, and you saw Mike Ross won convincingly, Mike Beebe wins convincingly, and then these other races that—which you had predicted for the most part, or at least been in the right, you know, sphere with. And then you see these other races turn out like you were seeing them play in some of the polling data, too. I mean, I think it definitely—that 2010 election cycle put us on the map for credibility because we were pretty right with what we were seeing in the numbers.

[00:37:43] JD: And then we move to 2012 and 2014, and we see two election cycles where the momentum that had begun in

2010 just completely washes over the state, where we see not just majority status change in general assembly, but Republicans by 2014 have a critical mass of a supermajority in the legislature. All the congressional seats, the US Delegation or US Congress positions, all six seats are held by the end of 2014 by Republicans, all constitutional offices are held by Republicans. Other . . .

RB: Big, big majorities in the legislature too, yeah.

[00:38:25] JD: Absolutely. So during that two-year period between [20]12 and [20]14, are there some particular races that stand out that you go back now in hindsight and say, "Those were illustrative of the much larger trend that we were seeing before our eyes?"

RB: Yeah. I mean, [20]12 was the big presidential election year, the Obama reelection year, which you knew he was not gonna carry the State of Arkansas from everything you had been seeing for so long. I mean, he was polling in the mid 30s, sometimes the low 30s, a good day bumping 38 or 39 percent. So I mean, you knew this state wasn't going to be contested for that. How did it play out in other races? You know, there weren't constitutional races that year. The congressional races were primarily incumbents, except for, I think in the Fourth District, I think

that's the year Tom Cotton ran for Congress. But you know, that just was not a highly competitive race. And he had been hyped for so long as the, you know, the new Republican candidate of the future. So there was a lot riding on that race. [00:39:33] I don't think there's any race in 2012 in particular that I feel like set up 2014. Twenty ten was a wave election year for Republicans. They made big gains at the open seats in the constitutional offices. They made big gains in the legislature. They won quite—all the legislative seats that were—didn't have an incumbent in them. So 2010 was a really big wave year for Republicans. Twenty twelve was really an incremental year for them. They did go to majority status in the legislature that year, but it was just because they had gotten so many big gains in 2010. Twenty twelve kind of put them over the cusp by, you know, five to seven votes. And then 2014 was another wave year for the Republicans. That's when they made, as you mentioned, supermajorities in the legislature, all of the constitutional offices, all of the federal offices. I mean, there really wasn't a Democrat standing. [00:40:30] So I think the 2014 races are the ones that I look to as kind of the ultimate culmination for the Republican party here. They had done their work in 2010 and 2012. And 2014 was the exclamation point for

them. The governor's race was a huge race for them. The US Senate race, Mark Pryor and David—and Tom Cotton. That was a huge race for them. And then when they won all of the other races on the ballot, you know, federal and state level, it was obvious that—you know, and they won by big margins. I mean, it was seven, eight, nine, low-double-digit wins in some of those races. It just was—was just a blood bath for the Democrats, who had some really good candidates in those races. Mike Ross was a great candidate for governor. James Lee Witt was a great candidate for Congress. Pat Hays was a great candidate for Congress. And they weren't even close because of the national mood for Republicanism in Arkansas had really seeped fully into the Arkansas voter psyche after—by this third election cycle.

[00:41:46] JD: You talked a little bit about the nationalization of politics. Do you think Republicans did a better job, frankly, of using the unpopularity of President Obama, the difficulty in threading those needles among conservative Democrats in Arkansas for Democrats—for the Democratic Party in Arkansas? Were they just able to exploit that in a way that was advantageous by 2014?

[00:42:12] RB: Yeah, I think so. And I mean, all you had to say was "Obama," if you were a Republican. I mean, I saw JP races that

were using flyers with the president on them. I mean, you know, "He's going to take away your health care. I'm running for justice of the peace, will you vote for me?" Which has nothing to do with health care policy. [*Laughs*] But that was the unpopularity of the president that they exploited. And there just wasn't a counter message for the Democrats. What was the message? You know, "Hey, give the Affordable Care Act a chance, and it might get better, and you might like it." You know, I mean, that's not a winning message, you know. The economy was improving, but we were still not fully back from the 2008, 2009 financial crisis. And while there was a lot of progress that had been made, it wasn't something that the Democrats could hang their hat on as, "Hey, we did this."

[00:43:07] And kind of going back to our conversation about governors and the strengths of their personalities. You know, Mike Beebe was an immensely popular governor, but he was term limited. And his brand had kind of taken on its own identity, like Mike Huckabee's brand had taken on its own identity and Bill Clinton's brand had taken on its own identity, like going back to Rockefeller, that was an identity. That's why it didn't take root and go further. And so there just—you know, Mike Beebe couldn't pass the torch to Mike Ross in a way that

showed the voter that this will be a continuation of my policies, even though I think they were fairly aligned politically. The state was ready to vote for Republicans, and what that meant from a national Republican perspective—because they were watching twenty-four-hour news. They were seeing all the battles in Congress, and all of that translated down to literally the county level in your politics.

[00:44:07] JD: And this will get edited out probably, but I remember distinctly in 2010 a story—I think it was out of Central Arkansas of—I believe it was a local race either for mayor or justice of the piece, where someone had legally changed her name to Republican in the middle—the middle name was Republican.

RB: Yeah.

JD: And I think that was the first time it really hit home to me that this was really about really more of a nationalizing sort of branding.

[00:44:33] RB: Yeah. It was the Bryant mayor's race, and it was Jill Dabbs, who now I think leads the Springdale Downtown Alliance or something like that. She was running for mayor of Bryant and wanted to legally change her name to Jill Republican Dabbs so that she could use that on the ballot. And quite frankly, I think she lost that case, but she got all the publicity that she

needed for saying, "I'm Jill Republican Dabbs." "Oh, right, right, right. I know who you are." And so she got the benefit of it, even though she—I don't think she won the case, but yeah, that's a true story. I mean tha—yeah, that's where you really saw that wanting to identify with the Republican brand because it would help you, not only with Republican voters, but as our polling was showing, independent voters had—were really gravitating towards Republican candidates. [00:45:28] When you would look at cross tabs of how self-identified independents were choosing their candidates—I mean, straight-ballot Republican by a two-to-one, three-to-one, and once in a blue moon, we'd see a four-to-one margin that you just were like, I mean, you—Democrats, aren't going to overcome that if you've got independents in that big of a block voting that significantly for Republican candidates. And it took a few cycles, I think, for those independent voters to say, "I've been voting Republican for the last three or four cycles. I think I'm an identified Republican now." And I think that's where we are today with people identifying themselves as Republicans when we do polling. And we ask them to, you know, please explain your party affiliation. You give them a choice of Republican, Democrat, independent, or other. And you'll see a Republican is

going to be the larger of all of those. You know, there's a plurality there for Republicans now.

[00:46:31] JD: I think that speaks to the strength of psychological attachment to party ID that you had Arkansas voters for really over a decade that were split largely in thirds, who a third of whom were identifying as independents, but were really still voting for Democrats or, as you say, eventually voting for Republicans, and it took cycles for them to sort of come to terms with that change.

[00:46:58] RB: Yeah. That's—that is one of the more fascinating psychology experiments that the polling has showed us, you know, is that—'cause you would see them, and you're like, you know, 38 percent are identifying as independents, and Republicans are winning with 65 percent of the votes. That's—that doesn't sync up. You know, they're not independents, they're Republicans, they're just calling themselves independents. But I think it was hard for a lot of people that had voted Democrat for, you know, for decades, which is—you know, you're seeing those numbers in senior voters in particular that would say, you know, "I'm an independent now. You know, my dad was a Democrat. My dad's dad was a Democrat." And now you've got this—you know, an older—somebody in their sixties

or seventies that's probably voted Democrat most of their life now saying, "I really don't identify with the National Democratic Party. I identify with the National Republican Party on some particular issues. And that's where my affiliation is now, but I can't call myself a Republican yet." You know. [*Laughs*] But eventually they have gotten there.

[00:48:11] JD: So much has been written about Arkansas's long-held status as the last solid Democratic Southern state. And in your opinion, what do you think were the reasons that led to the sudden and dominating suddenness of that partisan change? I know we've touched on it some. Is there anything else you'd care to elaborate on in terms of that sudden shift after decades and really more than a century of Democratic dominance?

[00:48:36] RB: Yeah, I—and we have hit around the edges, but just to maybe more concisely say it. I mean, number one, the nationalization of local politics took full effect over the last decade. Twenty-four-hour news cycles. You can get your news from a partisan source if you want it, and lot of people do. And so that has kind of compounded that situation in terms of making you believe more that you are of one party affiliation or the other. And in this case, Republican in Arkansas. Obama was

tremendously unpopular in Arkansas for, I think a couple of reasons. One, I think race played a big part of that. He was the first African American president, and there are parts of Arkansas that you can drive through that you will see very clearly with the Confederate flags and the lack of a minority population in those counties or communities. You can't say that race didn't play some sort of factor. What percentage, I don't know, but it was a factor. [00:49:37] I think there was a lack of a cultural connection between Arkansas and President Obama. He wasn't from the South, he didn't have any kind of personal connection to the South or to Arkansas. He was a Chicago, urban, you know, scholarly, Ivy League educated person, and to the typical Arkansan, that's a pretty unrelatable set of characteristics. [00:50:08] You know, even though we've had other presidents that have fit that bill. But you know, George W. Bush, for instance, would go cut logs on his farm. You know, I mean, well, good old boys in Arkansas can relate to that, you know. And Bill Clinton could talk about driving around in an El Camino and, you know, for whatever reason he said he was doing it and that—and people in Arkansas can relate to that. You know, it was very difficult for them to connect with Obama in that way. And I think that that had a lot to do with the change. And you

could see it really kind of manifest itself by the time Hillary Clinton became the Democratic presidential nominee in 2016. I mean, the former First Lady of Arkansas, the airport in Little Rock is named after her and Bill Clinton, obviously, the Clinton Library is here. But our politics have become so nationalized by then, she became a national political figure and not an Arkansas political figure. You know, I curiously would love to see if Bill Clinton could win an election in Arkansas in this day and age. I think it would be a lot more difficult [*laughs*] for him than it was during his prime. So—just because of the way that we think about politics today.

[00:51:25] JD: I've got a demographic question coming up. But considering the shift and the historical significance of it, are there any other closing thoughts that we need to consider or anything else that you feel that you need to share as we close this chapter?

[00:51:43] RB: Well, I would just say that as we kind of look forward to the next decade, you know, what do you think is kind of on the horizon? Maybe somebody will play this back to me in [*laughs*] ten years and say, "You were so off base." But I think that this Republican tide in Arkansas is going to continue, if not even grow a little bit stronger, even though we see nationally

some pushback on that in terms of polling and in terms of national mood and, you know, the demographics that are changing with younger voters versus older voters. The—in Arkansas, what will happen in 2021 is redistricting and reapportionment will take place. And you have some very small Democratic gains over the last two cycles since Trump has been president, and a lot of those districts are barely—were barely won by Democrats. So if the Republicans will be in charge of the redistricting process, they've got the ability to kind of carve those out in a completely legal way to really even push the Democrats further back than where they have made some small gains in the last couple of years. So I think that's a big deal.

[00:52:59] And then you've got the whole congressional redistricting process. You know, the Second District's the only one that's been competitive in Arkansas this decade. And it hadn't been that competitive very often, you know, but still Democrats, I think, are regaining a little bit of foothold here. And again, Republicans will have the chance to change those district lines and make them more favorable to a Republican candidate if they want to. You know, who's to say that they wouldn't carve Pulaski County up into four congressional districts and give a little bit everywhere. I mean, anything's possible.

And so I think that the Republicans havin' control of that process here going into 2021 is gonna make—give them some advantages that they could really sustain their gains and their majorities for the next decade, despite what's happening demographically and despite how those things are changing. If you look at the data and you, again, do it legally, the process will allow for that. I would not be surprised to see that happen.

[00:54:04] JD: So we can—it goes as far back as 1949 when V. O. Key writes this piece on Southern politics. And he looks at all of these Democratically dominated Southern states. And in Arkansas, he says, to paraphrase, it's the one-party dominant state in its most undefiled form. We are purely one party. And he goes into some detail about the faults of that sort of governmental structure. And of course, that's long ago, long history. We could go as far back as the 1960s and argue that the Republican Party of Arkansas didn't quite operate like a competitive party in a two-party system, that it may have operated as almost sort of an outside organization looking in, almost like a third party, really, for a long time. And we've talked a little bit about how rule changes affected that all the way up until the 1990s. You've discussed the impacts of redistricting, perhaps, in the future. Are we looking, ten, twenty

years down the road at another one-party state?

[00:55:02] RB: I think so, although I think that the Republican Party in Arkansas, which will be this dominant one party, will have some of the same growth pains that the Democrats had back in the [19]60s up until the Republicans took over. There's gonna be a lot of factions in the Republican Party. You are gonna have your what I would describe as your mainstream moderate, you know, a little bit center-right Republicans, and then you're going to have some far-right Republicans, and they're gaining some strength right now. I kind of—it's a combination of whatever you want to put into the formula there, but you know, there's some Tea Party influence in these Republicans. There is definitely a strong anti-government, you know, reduced-government bias in their politics there. And then you have some other Republicans that are a little bit more for status quo and keeping things moving and not necessarily blowing things up and starting over again or destroying something that you might have an agenda on per se. Incrementalist versus, you know, let's do something big. I think that's going to be a big faction in Republican Party politics for the next decade. [00:56:19] We've already seen it play out in some elections. Like look at the primaries this year with a John Cooper versus a Dan Sullivan up

in Northeast Arkansas. I mean, that was mainstream Republican versus Tea Party Republican there, and Tea Party won. And won handily with the governor backing the mainstream Republican candidate and the governor having an incredible, incredibly large popularity number. So I just—I think that that's where the Republican Party is headed for the next ten years is really some battle for the soul and control of the party. And I don't think either—any particular faction will win. I think it'll be a constant dance of—or maybe better put, a constant boxing match of jabs and punches and one side winning a little bit in some elections and another side winning in some other elections. [00:57:16]

And then the Democrats are out there almost as like this third party that you've described the Republicans were, looking in, trying to figure out strategically where can they make some inroads? Where can they pick up a seat or two, where can they make a gain? And I think for the Democrats, the big challenge is gonna be they gotta find some twenty- and thirty-year-olds that can be their farm club for the future. And they're going to have to run like Republicans did and lose for years and years and years. Asa Hutchinson ran four times before he got elected to office. I mean, he took lumps for the team for a long time to build a brand that would finally be able to lead for eight years as

governor. He served in Congress, but I'm just saying from—on a statewide basis, I think that Democrats are gonna have to find their candidates like that, the—that underscore what they want to be as a political party, that can articulate what that is, and really go out there and start building that brand for ten to fifteen years down the road when things demographically might get more competitive. That's not to say there won't be some one-off winners in there every now and then, like we saw an Ed Bethune or a Jay Dickey from time to time. There could be a Democrat that sneaks in and does something special for a couple of cycles there. But in terms of it being a robust, large, you know, viable party again, like it was, it is going to take a long time for that to happen on a grand scale.

JD: Well, on behalf of the Pryor Center, Roby, thank you so much for offering your time and your insights on what has been a, without a doubt, historical moment in Arkansas politics.

RB: You're welcome, John.

[End of interview 00:59:15]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]