

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

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Blue to Red Oral History Project

Bill Vickery
Interviewed by John C. Davis
September 28, 2021
Little Rock, Arkansas

Objective

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

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

Transcript Methodology

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

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

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

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

Citation Information

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in Little Rock, Arkansas.**

[00:00:00]

John C. Davis: Here with me is Bill Vickery. Bill is a long-term fixture in Arkansas politics. In 1996 he was a campaign manager for the successful US Senate campaign of Tim Hutchinson. He is the founding partner of the Capitol Advisors Group. He is frequently on different broadcast stations and radio regarding Arkansas politics and culture. And we are very thankful to have you with us today, Bill, in—on behalf of the Pryor Center and this effort, we're very appreciative of your time, and we know you'll have a lot of great, interesting insights into the last twenty or so years in Arkansas politics.

Bill Vickery: Well, I don't know about that, but I do appreciate the opportunity to be here. Thank you very much for the invitation.

[00:00:45] JD: Absolutely, absolutely. So what we're doing in this project is we're looking at this historical moment of, really, national prominence, but particularly looking at the state. We have this long tradition of being a Democratic state. Over 150 years of virtual just dominance by one party. We do see periods in time, such as the election of Governor Rockefeller in the

[19]60s, Frank White in the [19]80s, of course, Tim Hutchinson's success in the 1990s, and a few sprinkled in there before that. But what we're really looking at is the events leading up to and then that time period between 2005 and 2015, where we see historical shifts in partisanship. We go from arguably the most Democratic state in the country, perennially, to perhaps the most Republican state, as former chairman Doyle Webb said in the 2020 GOP Convention, almost overnight. If you were living under a rock, you could have woken up one day and said, "Wow, this all happened with just the flick of a switch." We know there were other things at play for years to come, but it just wasn't at the surface. And so we know you'll have a lot of insights there, and we're very excited to have you with us. [00:02:02] One way I'm framing this study is looking at the modern-day GOP in Arkansas and—in sort of three generations. And so the first generation I suggest is between 1966 and [19]92. Covers a lot of ground, but starts with Rockefeller's successful attempt at governor—running for governor after a failed attempt in [19]64. And it ends with the ascendance of Governor Clinton to DC, which also, though, sets in—unexpectedly, perhaps—this sort of motion that gives us a governor in Mike be—Mike Huckabee, who serves for over ten years. We also see the GOP really in the

[19]90s start to grow as far as organizationally speaking, fundraising, strength of candidates. Tim Hutchinson, of course, ascends to the Senate. [00:02:52] We then see this era in this [19]93 to 2010 period, where much of what was rooted, I think, in the [19]92 election particularly starts to take shape. So again, the [19]90s are a prominent time politically where we start to see two competitive parties in the state for perhaps the first time. And then, of course, by 2010 you start to see a real wave forming, sort of a mixed message where Governor Beebe wins reelection soundly, but below him on the constitutional tickets, you see a lot of Republicans gaining office. And then 2011 to today, where we have not only Republican majorities in the state legislature, but supermajorities. All four of our House members are Republican and both of our US Senators. It is just a dead lock Republican state with exception of a few pockets, which is almost a complete reversal from what we would've seen just a few decades ago. [00:03:47] So with that, Bill, what is your earliest political memory in Arkansas?

[00:03:54] BV: Oh, my gosh. I'm really gonna date myself here, but my father was our county sheriff for many years in Crawford County. And so I grew up in a political household. November the sixth is my birthday, so I was born right near Election Day in

1966. So it was always—you know, I was always involved with understanding what was going on in politics. [00:04:18] But my earliest is waking up in early September, maybe? It was the long, hot summer of Arkansas politics the year that Dale Bumpers unseated J. William Fulbright for a US Senate seat. And hearing it on the radio as a child waking up, and my father being sort of—not astonished. He knew Dale Bumpers. But more—well, surprised, I guess, that you would unseat a sitting US Senator, and that sort of being the buzz around the breakfast table the year that happened. It was a—that was a really, I think, a landmark moment, too, in Arkansas politics. But that's the earliest memory that I have.

[00:05:03] JD: Do you recall growing up, so maybe before you really start a career in politics and public policy, but maybe a point a little bit older in your childhood where you can recall the perception of the Democratic Party and the Republican Party in the state?

[00:05:18] BV: Oh yeah, junior high, high school. I mean, again, because my father had been actively involved in politics as our sheriff, it was—I was—had a complete understanding of how dominant the Democratic Party was. We didn't know, in my family, that there was an election in November in the state of

Arkansas. We knew that, you know, the presidential election occurred then. 'Cause everything happened in the Democratic primary. And so that was the trigger point for all politics in our home and in Crawford County at the time. So it was fairly obvious as I made my progression through grade school, junior high, and high school that the Democratic Party—and then you get to know the two senators involved, Pryor and Bumpers, and of course, this young guy named Bill Clinton who ran for attorney general, who ran for Congress the first time in Northwest Arkansas and lost. But I have a vivid memory of him coming to our neighborhood, and my father ho—that we held a little coffee for him. And I remember I got to stay home from school so I could be a part of that that day. So it was very clear that, you know, there was a—the Democratic Party was not just dominant, but it was unheard of—I didn't—we didn't know who Republicans were at that point in time.

[00:06:34] JD: So you started to follow politics at a young age. Was there a time when you could sort of align yourself with a party or with a movement or an ideology? And then where did that sort of place you in Arkansas politics at the time?

[00:06:47] BV: Well, I was very active in Young Democrats, actually, growing up and sort of through high school and into college.

And so that was a—I would go to the conventions and knew a lot of folks that were involved in that and was—I had an identity in terms of Arkansas politics, identifying with the Democratic Party, but in a very different way, I think that—you know, Reagan through the [19]80s exposed to a lot of the fissures that existed that we had never put together between, say, the National Democrats and the National Republicans. And so it was that unique balance of Arkansas being a strong state for Reagan and then George H. W. Bush, yet being fundamentally at its core still one of the bluest states in the nation from an elected office standpoint. It was at that kind of moment in time you began to realize the philosophical differences between the two and the real—the gulf that existed on—from a partisan standpoint at that point.

[00:07:51] JD: You bring up a great point there too, in that, really beginning in the late [19]60s, certainly into the [19]70s with Nixon, and then without a doubt in the 1980s with President Reagan, Arkansas is heavily favoring Republicans at the top of the ticket for presidential races, with exception of maybe a Southern governor, perhaps, who's a Democrat. But with exception of that, it is a pretty strong trend towards Republican presidential candidates. But also, it's not going top down, right.

It's not really transferring down . . .

BV: Right.

JD: . . . to even Congressional races in most instances, certainly not at the local level. I think you're speaking to that as well, that fissure. Do you think that really—would you give President Reagan a lot of the credit there in sort of highlighting that divide?

[00:08:36] BV: It's interesting. I think two major events occurred. Obviously, Reagan in [19]80 understanding politics in the South, where you saw, again, states that had traditionally Democratic legislature and Democratic governors would vote for a conservative Republican like Reagan overwhelmingly, as you saw happen throughout the South. And then Bill Clinton comes along in [19]92. And Clinton had learned from that over a long period of time, being a Southern governor, seeing a state that would vote for a conservative person at the national level, and then have legislative—you know, have sort of a blue state in terms of the legislature. Clinton, I think, understood that uniquely more than almost anyone else in the country. And so he played on that so that he had an appeal that sort of transcended blue and red, and he was able to reach out to some Southern states, some maybe some more conservative states, the box states and

things like that. And I think his experience at being a governor in the South through that sort of late [19]70s, [19]80s probably served him very well in understanding the mood of the nation and how states could flip back and forth.

[00:09:45] JD: So tell us about your first political job, whether it be as a volunteer or as a paid staff?

[00:09:51] BV: It—my first political job was in 1994. And I was—i literally had the lowest rung that you could be on the political spectrum in terms of paid positions. I was the volunteer coordinator and grassroots manager of a ballot initiative campaign. It wasn't even a candidate campaign. And so if you want to know what the bottom is in American politics, I can tell you [*laughs*] 'cause that's exactly where I was, trying to get people to support an initiative that changed workers comp law in the state of Arkansas. So it wasn't even anything really sort of emotionally or supercharged in terms of the sexiness on the political arena. It was as low as you can possibly be and still get a paycheck. That's where I started in 1994.

[00:10:42] JD: But from there, in 1995 to 1996, you're beginning to work with Tim Hutchinson's campaign. Would you tell us about that?

[00:10:49] BV: Yeah, [19]96 was an interesting year in Arkansas

politics because I had—I became the manager of a ballot initiative campaign, a special-election campaign, only be—and I was only the manager because the campaign consultant had been fired. So I was all that was left inside the campaign, so I became the manager, and we ended up winning overwhelmingly. It was a big win. [00:11:12] And some of the people behind that were supporters of then state Senator Lu Hardin, as a Democrat, running as a Democrat. So I got a job then to move from that campaign over to Lu Hardin's Democrat US Senate race. And I became his press secretary. And the day that I went to work for him, his campaign consultant died. And so you look around the campaign, and I was elevated to campaign manager. So one gets fired, one passes away. And we run a very valiant campaign on the Democratic side. Lu was a pro-life, anti-tax, conservative Democrat who was beaten in a runoff by the then attorney general Winston Bryant that had organized a lot of labor and a lot of traditional Democratic support to overwhelm Senator Hardin in the runoff. And it was during that runoff that our then governor, Jim Guy Tucker, was convicted in one of the Whitewater related trials. So the Republican nominee for the US Senate, Mike Huckabee, ascends to become governor and chooses to step out of the US Senate race, so Republicans

are faced with no real candidate. They have a convention, and they nominate a really brilliant guy, Tim Hutchinson, who was a Congressman from Northwest Arkansas. He has no campaign apparatus to speak of. [00:12:28] And so I had seen what had happened to what I knew was a good conservative man in the Democratic primary, and knew that there was no future for me inside the Democratic Party in the way it was heading, and got the opportunity to take a lot of those folks, a lot of those conservative Democrats who'd been a part of that campaign, over to the Hutchinson campaign and became the manager of his campaign. And of course, we go on, and he's the first Republican ever elected to the United States Senate.

[00:12:57] Now there'd been a carpet bagger [*laughs*] that the Republicans put in in Reconstruction. But just he ran a brilliant campaign. Nothing to do with me, really. He was just very hardworking, very smart, very engaged, traveled the state. And it was at that moment in time that I realized you could make a difference. The right guy could win a race, could be a Republican and win. And had a really smart team of consultants around him. And I just sorta kinda held on for dear life. And we ended up winning, and you know, my fate was sealed from there on on the Republican side of things, as well as working in

politics.

[00:13:34] JD: So two things come to mind there. If we back up a bit, we spoke earlier about that [19]92 election cycle. It does so many things in hindsight. It pulls Clinton to DC. Perhaps some of the Democratic talent base in Arkansas goes with him. You have a ballot initiative that invokes or begins the process of term limits, and you start this line of succession that no one really would've foreseen at the time that you touched on, with Jim Guy Tucker's resignation amid scandal, then Mike Huckabee becoming governor. All these things falling into place over the next four or five years. [00:14:19] Did that speed up the process, you think, for Republicans, or was it going to be a foregone conclusion that at some point down the road, maybe in the near future, as maybe we saw around 2010 or so, that we would see what we ended up seeing?

[00:14:32] BV: It's interesting because yes and no. On the one hand, as you point out, I mean, Bill Clinton becomes governor. Jim Guy Tucker, who was lieutenant governor, becomes governor. Now there's a special election. And we saw, for the first time, the special election turnout favoring conservatives. Mike Huckabee becomes lieutenant governor for the state of Arkansas. Later on we find these ballot initiatives that were all

special elections that dealt with tax increases and other things—overwhelmingly, conservatives showed up. So it was at that moment in time that you began to see a lot of really conservative folks that no longer really identified with the Democratic Party and were starting to shift over. So yes, on the one hand, I think you could say—and look, and Mike Huckabee, a very popular, glib, smart, charismatic guy that the Republicans were happy to have as sort of the face of the party for over a decade. So, yes. [00:15:27] On the other hand, Bill Clinton becoming president, I think, held back the Republican Party in many other ways in the sense that, where you saw more congressional officials become Republican in Southern states as a result of the [19]94 election cycle in the Republican takeover of the House of Representatives, you didn't really see that in Arkansas. And it retarded that growth for a period of time because he was still a popular guy back here in the state, and he still had a connection to the state. And you could still identify as a conservative Democrat and be taken seriously as a candidate. And so in many ways it was the beginning, and in many ways Clinton's person—the sheer force of his personality, I think, kept the Republican Party from growing as much as it could have through the [19]90s as other Southern states did.

[00:16:17] JD: That's a great point. So when we start to see, perhaps, the rise of a more nationalized sort of politics and it's harder to separate—it's harder to be maybe a conservative Democrat or kind of a moderate-to-left-leaning Republican. We had a favorite son in Bill Clinton in DC who was perhaps able to remind more conservative voters in Arkansas and maybe even other areas of the country, well, he's the face of that party, and he's more moderate than sort of what they're being made out to be, right, among maybe the Republican revolution in the 1990s. So as you're sort of saying, that stemmed the tide a little bit in many ways. That's interesting. [00:16:56] You also speak to another thing during your experience with the Hutchinson campaign where you go from being the campaign manager in the Democratic race to the campaign manager in a Republican race. Could that be done today?

[00:17:08] BV: You know, probably not, but at the time, there was an effort by then Congressman Hutchinson to show that you could garner Democratic support, that he could reach across the aisle. 'Cause you have to remember, this is [19]96. Bill Clinton is running for reelection at the same time that Tim Hutchinson is being elected to the United States Senate as a Republican. And so I think that was an effort to say, "Look, you know, you guys

can—you can vote for me. It's okay. You're not betraying anything." And then Jay Dickey, of course, in South Arkansas I think had a big presence in what was going on in Republican Party politics. And you kinda wake up, and you thought, "Well, we've got a US Senator that's a Republican. We got a couple of Congressmen now that're Republicans." And you could feel the shift for folks who would be willing to support or split their ticket a little more evenly. [00:18:02] But then again, as I said, then the sheer force of Bill Clinton's personality, I think, helped tamp a lot of that stuff down. And then, of course, you saw a very popular Mike Huckabee, but he didn't have a Democratic legislature. He had—literally, he, I think, was at one point in time the weakest Republican governor in the country by sheer legislative numbers simply because there weren't Republicans. It didn't trickle down to the state legislative level.

[00:18:31] JD: And we're well known historically as having a weak governor in our constitution . . .

BV: Constitutionally, yeah.

JD: . . . anyway. So if you're a Mike Huckabee, and you are faced down with significant majorities in the opposing party, it's a tough task.

BV: Yeah. He was very popular and yet, you know, he had to—to

accomplish anything—and it was—and listen, you know, hats off to him. I mean, he had to maneuver things legislatively, unlike—I don't think any other governor—well, maybe you go back to Rockefeller and, of course, his time. But Huckabee was—he was also a unique man for that time, too.

[00:19:07] JD: So as you said, this was the—the US Senate race in [19]96 was the first time that we had seen a Republican ascend to that office by the voices or the votes of the voters in Arkansas. Take us back to that moment. Was that appreciated as the historical feat that it was at the time?

[00:19:26] BV: I think—I mean, I remember the night 'cause it was very odd in that you had the president coming back to the Old State House where he had been four years earlier, having a huge reelection celebration back at the same spot again. And a half a block over, we're having this big celebration for a Republican US Senator that had just been elected. I think people did appreciate it. I think they understood it as the political anomaly that it was. I mean, if you think about that, you know, popular president in his home state reelected, yet a person from the opposite party elected to a US Senate seat—again shows the unique nature of the Arkansas voters, still, I believe. [00:20:15] But I do think it was—there was—I don't think there was a global

sense of what was going on. It was just a personal sense. It was an inside the state and some small towns and in Little Rock and a few other places, I think. Insiders really understood it because we hadn't been affected by the national media landscape that we would come to see with cable television, and then with niche cable television, then, of course, with the internet and social media.

[00:20:43] JD: Good point, good point. So maybe beginning in the [19]96 election or going a little further back to Mike Huckabee's days when he's first lieutenant governor and then eventually ascending to the Governor's Office, we see these significant GOP moments in the 1990s of historical importance for the state of Arkansas and its politics. But you had a unique advantage in that you saw behind the scenes what was going on in these campaigns, what was going on maybe with the party apparatus and down to the grassroots level. [00:21:19] What do you think was going on that we might have missed that made it a little less surprising that in 2010, 2012, we started to see this massive red wave over the state?

[00:21:31] BV: Yeah. I do think there was a lot of organization that was occurring. And so if you're down in Miller County in Texarkana, you might not know what was going on in, say,

Craighead County in Jonesboro. In sort of small pockets with younger business people, there was a real push to want to become organized and to understand what was going on. And while the majorities weren't there to flip state legislative seats just yet, you did see candidates start to gather some more momentum. You saw the fall elections really start to matter for the first time. [00:22:08] And so I think was—that's something that people underestimated that you didn't really see or understand that was going on through the [19]90s was that very sort of slow, honest, grassroots development coming up. And then I think that's also, for a variety of reasons that I know we'll get into, but that's also a part of why it flips so quickly. That it wasn't that far to go. It wasn't as though we started from zero in 2010 and 2015. It was—it had been building up for some time. So that organization, I think, is really missed and underappreciated as an impactful event in Arkansas politics.

[00:22:47] JD: You know, one thing that I think has always been interesting in Arkansas politics is that the Arkansas voters have—if you were to look back at historical returns not going that far back, you would've said, "Oh, well, they're all Democrats, almost to a one." But if you look at polling data, and you dig a little deeper, they were less loyal to the party in terms

of self-reporting as Independents. And they had been for some decades at this point. Going back even to the 1960s and [19]70s, we started to see this movement. They weren't identifying as Republicans, but they were moving away from branding themselves as Democrats. Can you explain this? This was years before, right, we see what we see today. What do you think was going on there?

[00:23:27] BV: You know, again, I think it—a lot about the—well, and every state believes this—the independence of the voter. We have a unique geographic makeup in Arkansas in that if you drive an hour southeast of here, you're in the Old South, the true Delta, you're in the Mississippi River Delta area. You can get over there, and that's true Southern politics. You can then drive for three or four hours in one direction, and it's basically the same topography, basically the same agribusiness dominant sort of thing. You drive an hour and a half Northwest of here, and you get into another part of the country in reality. And so the Northwestern part of the state, that area up there bordering Missouri and Kansas is a little more Midwestern, is a little more— from both its thinking and clearly in its topography. [00:23:19] And so it is—Arkansas sort of bisects the South with the Midwest, I think. And it's unique in that many areas of the

state—it did take longer. The—other factors engaged to try to flip those from blue to red. In maybe the Northwestern part of the state or more of that Midwestern part of the state, it worked a lot faster. I think that's something that's missed often about Arkansas politics. Now once cable television began to dominate the landscape, once we began to nationalize these things, all those differences go away, and you're all living in, you know, one big cable universe at that moment in time. But for a long time, I think that was an issue.

[00:25:01] JD: And I think, too, that we often overlook or forget, and shouldn't, the significant contribution of John Paul Hammerschmidt and his electoral successes. He and Rockefeller sort of coordinate a little bit in terms of party organization. John Paul runs for Congress, Rockefeller runs for governor. And we see that between the two of them, Hammerschmidt's really the one that has the staying power in terms of staying in office for a very long time and becomes really a prominent fixture in Arkansas politics, but in sort of a different light because he's Republican.

BV: Yeah.

[00:25:37] JD: And we forget that the demographics and topography of a large portion of the state favored Republicans

for a long time. There just weren't that many of them . . .

BV: Right.

JD: . . . in those pockets. Enough to keep him in office and to beat back a young up-and-comer Bill Clinton, as you'd mentioned, but maybe not enough yet to spread. And I think that's a really good point to mention. And so I guess we've talked—you know, there's this independent streak, maybe, in voters in Arkansas. The [19]68 election comes to mind where voters in Arkansas favor—in sort of a split ticket situation but—George Wallace for president.

BV: Yeah.

[00:26:15] JD: He was a third-party candidate at this time. He's left the Democratic Party. You know, J. William Fulbright, who by now is staunchly, if not anti-Vietnam War is at least an open critic of the policies of Vietnam War. And then we pivot again, and we continue with a reform-minded Rockefeller. Republican governor. That tradition—I know we all say, "Oh, our state's special," but there seems to be some odd streaks in the Arkansas electorate that we can sometimes forget. [00:26:46] What do you think—so today, if we're looking at polling, and easily over the last ten years, we're seeing more individuals identifying as Independents, but even more identifying as

Republicans. And you've touched a little bit on nationalized politics, cable TV. Do you think that's the effect that we're seeing in many ways?

[00:27:06] BV: I think since 2010, especially, three things have impacted Arkansas politics. And I think that's fairly universal. One, I think that the rise of the influence of cable television and specifically cable news television, and now I'm talking MSNBC, CNN, Fox News—specifically Fox News and what Roger Ailes set out to do there and what he did—and how that began to dominate the conversation of what was going on in American politics and specifically in Arkansas politics and what was happening. [00:27:41] I also think the rise of interconnectivity through social media and through the internet in general, but specifically through social media, that had an enormous amount to do with it because for the first time, big blocks of people could communicate in a decentralized fashion with one another and understand what was going on. You think about this—most Arkansans didn't pay attention to cloture votes in the United States Senate. But they sure did in 2010 because that was a big issue in Blanche Lincoln and losing her US Senate seat because they paid attention, not to the actual vote on the floor, but to the cloture vote that allowed it to be brought to the floor to

begin with. How do you know anything about that if you're not a political insider? But framed by cable news, distributed by social media and interconnectivity through the web with a lot of folks.

[00:28:38] And then lastly, I think the presidency of Barack Obama really brought to bear the schism that had occurred between the conservative Arkansas voter and what their members were being forced to vote on on a national level. You had an administration and a president that sorta favored sorta big-city, urban politics. And they felt like they were being disenfranchised from that. And they didn't understand why that Blanche Lincoln would support this or Mark Pryor would support something. He forced the hand of a lot of folks to have to vote on legislation that they—or vote for cloture for legislation that they normally wouldn't do on the Senate side. Those three things nationalized Arkansas politics, and they did it [*snaps*] in a heartbeat, I mean, just like that, to your point. You go with the elections in 2010 and then [20]12 and then boom into [20]14, and now you've got—[20]14 is the wipeout, is the knockout blow for the Republican Party up and down the ticket, all constitutional offices. In [20]10 you saw the legislature flip for the first time. And then you start to see—so Republicans take over for the first time. You see Blanche Lincoln lose.

[00:29:54] The confluence of all three of those things—they collide at an intersection, and it really just defines the Arkansas voter. It's no longer the Pink Tomato Festival in Warren or all the July fourth festivals that you would go to and work in Pangburn and all these other places. It's not that anymore. It's—suddenly, it's all—it's what's on Fox News that defines what's going on. And then it's shared with thousands and thousands of voters all throughout Arkansas on opinion pages on social media. That became the impactful thing. And that's where the heart of Arkansas politics shifted to.

[00:30:32] JD: So you think we've moved largely away from a retail politics, sort of a more provincial politics perhaps, to a more nationalized that—Senator Cotton comes to mind as somebody who regularly is criticized, you know, fairly or not, for maybe not being in Arkansas as much or maybe not getting to the Pink Tomato Festival or the Armadillo Festival or something like that. And yet it doesn't seem to affect his electoral prospects one bit. If anything, he's managed to remain popular at home while also being on short lists, at least among Republican insiders, for a presidential run one day.

[00:31:08] BV: As we sit here in 2021, he is a great example of that. He's beloved. Here's a man that came out critical of the farm

bill, which was the sacred cow in Arkansas politics for many years, very critical of the farm bill, voting against it, and yet picked up in popularity. Why? Because those very farmers that he had been talking to, that see him on Fox News, that understand how he's communicating, that share their opinions back and forth on social media had a wide variety of issues that they're interested in. And so he represents them and their beliefs. So he's a great example of what I'm talking about. He's not a creation of television or social media. He is the manifestation of a good candidate now in that era and what it takes to win. You—when you think about reaching out to Arkansas voters, it's become—you know, we're beyond just phones and mail. It is you can touch a frequent voter in Arkansas, ten, fifteen, twenty times a month in a wide variety of ways. Both—through television as well as through social media, through internet. The internet outreach, through mail, through all the traditional stuff. And so it's—they get to see their politician, just they don't have to see them at the Pink Tomato Festival. They can see them on Fox News.

[00:32:30] JD: Right. Right. So you've had a real diverse background in politics. And I mean, you've been involved in state, national, international politics and policy. Of course, we're

focused more on the state arena right now. But your work at— with—as the partner of the—the founding partner of Capitol Advisory Group. You do, I'm sure, a lot of consulting at the state level. [00:33:01] How has the inner workings of the General Assembly changed from, say, the era of maybe 2010, 2012, where you've got a growing Republican Party, then a majority Republican Party, to supermajorities. What has changed in that time period that you've noticed that maybe others wouldn't?

[00:33:23] BV: That's a very interesting question. And I'm gonna be a little contrarian. A lot of people focus in on social issues or the issues that we've seen over the last, say, decade with Republicans being in control, whether it be abortion or LGBTQ issues or whatever that might be. What I've really noticed is that the Arkansas General Assembly deals in a very sophisticated way now with companies that do business in Arkansas. You know, there was a point in time where Walmart, Tyson, and others, they went from being Arkansas companies who happened to do business outside the state to Arkansas headquartered companies who do business all over the world. And so the legislature here has a keen understanding of the Fortune 100 companies that have to come in and out of the state

to do business all the time. We've been fortunate to represent a number of them. And so you see how they have an understanding of Verizon that at one point in time had a big footprint in the city of Little Rock, and that's receded some, but they have an understanding of their issues. The global issues, the state legislators are aware of, and they're informed on, and they're sophisticated about. And I think that's not picked up. It's, you know, it's difficult. What are you gonna do? The Amazon, Walmart, you know, things like that. But these guys, these men and women that serve, they have an understanding of how that affects the state, how the state then affects what else is going on in the country. [00:34:54] What's going on in China? And how does that affect us here in the United States, globally? An Eastern European arms manufacturer headquartering a plant in Arkansas—what it might take to try to lure that company here. They're all pretty smart on stuff like that. And I think if you just went back, say, thirty-five or forty years, it was very much isolated, very stove piped off. Very, Arkansas's this, and it's—you know, one or two building blocks in terms of economic development. And now they're much smarter, and they're aware of international business, and they understand what's going on nationally.

[00:34:34] JD: Is it fair to say that some of the infighting that we see—and a lot of that, I think, is just natural, right. I mean, we're at a point now in time where Republicans are so dominant in the General Assembly that, much like Democrats thirty years ago, most of the rivalries are in the party because there's just not that many in the minority party to pick on, really, or to have any opposition really toward. [00:35:57] Is it fair to say that right now, we're seeing a time period where—and I think you did a great job there of this juxtaposition of globalization, the effects of that, even in Arkansas now. Are there some, maybe in the party, in the General Assembly in particular, who are still going at business the way that maybe we once had, and then a group that's looking at a more global approach? Is that maybe some of this conflict that we're seeing as well?

[00:36:24] BV: I do think generationally you can see some back and forth amongst legislators. But it's no different than when Lloyd George was the Democrat and a titan in the House of Representatives, and he opposed some Bill Clinton initiatives, and they would have these famous fights on the front page of the *Arkansas Gazette*, when Max Howell and others, titans—and Knox Nelson and titans of the State Senate would be opposed to David Pryor and his change to Arkansas governing policy in

1977. It is a family fight. It's just the families have switched from Democrats to Republicans. And so it is that. [00:37:06] I do think you have picked up on something that I think is there, and that is generationally there is a difference legislatively. And you can see it in how legislators deal with issues. I think they all understand the importance of business and the economy and how that affects everything from schools to roads to everything. There's some universality there in terms of wanting to cut taxes and wanting to spur growth in the Arkansas economy. And seeing, I think, the first time seeing how Californians have fled to Texas, how New Yorkers and New Jerseyans have fled to Florida, wanting to lure some of those folks from Illinois and the high-tax areas down to Arkansas to live and work and start businesses and things like that. That's universal. How you go about doing that and how you engage in all that, that's where the fights, I think, occur.

[00:38:09] JD: Coming on back to where this starts in the General Assembly in [20]10, [20]12, and [20]14, particularly [20]12 and [20]14, are of interest to me here. Can you point to a couple races where looking back you go [*snaps*], "There it was. That was one of those races where if that one goes that way, then, you know, we're off to the races. The Republicans are not gonna

have majorities, they're gonna have"—I mean, really where they are today, they're going to have these prominent positions in virtually every office. I mean, really down to the county level, in most cases. And maybe even the local civic municipality level.

[00:38:43] BV: Good point. You look at [20]10, [20]10's when things flipped. [20]12 was when the Republican momentum kept going. If you remember, this is a year where Romney is losing, Obama is winning reelection, yet Republicans pick up seats in the House and the Senate here. And then you go forward to [20]14. And the real knockout blow becomes Asa Hutchinson winning in what turned out to be a walk at the end. And Tom Cotton with just a haymaker of a campaign running away and winning in [20]14. And so both of those guys at the top of the ticket. Then you see Republicans picking up even more seats. It was interesting. [00:39:19] And I think that I'm right when I say this, [20]12 and [20]14, or it might just have been [20]14, that was the first time more people voted in the Republican primary than in the Democratic primary. And it's only picked up steam since then. And so seeing that early partisan support—all this pre-Trump, by the way. All—you know, this is . . .

JD: Right, right.

BV: . . . predates his rise to power. That goes back to the work that I had talked about earlier that—they didn't really have to go from zero to fifty-one. It was more like twenty-five or thirty to fifty-one. The work that had been done that you didn't really pay attention to 'cause it wasn't a tipping point enough. But I think I might be right in [20]12 being the first cycle where you saw more people voted in the Republican primary than—I know in [20]14, it definitely was.

JD: Yeah.

BV: And of course, [20]16, [20]18, [20]20, we've seen it's really picked up steam.

[00:40:14] JD: Well, and you—I think you touch on that idea of a farm system of having people who, for nearly twenty years in many cases, were just oftentimes setting themselves up to lose in the fall, but eventually, right, eventually having that system in place, that grassroots network in place to really capitalize on this moment—and not only capitalize on the moment being 2010, perhaps, but then being able to maintain that momentum. And that's—I think that's something we miss sometimes is the momentum after [20]10 that continues in Arkansas.

[00:40:47] BV: It's great to contrast the two eras. I think in the [19]90s we had—there were good candidates, and then we

elected them to stuff as Republicans. And then we didn't have anybody to follow behind for them. We never could pick up the attorney general seat or win some of the bigger state Senate seats or any of the other statewide constitutional offices. Once you saw things tip in [20]14—yes, a lot of good candidates, a lot of people won. But then [20]16, [20]18, [20]20, there have been folks come behind them. And now you've got very active primary races all across the board. There gonna be a spirited campaign cycle in 2022. And that's the real difference because now you're talking about the first wave of candidates being successful. Now there's the second wave coming behind them who can be successful from a partisan standpoint. That's the real difference. And that's—it goes back to more people voting in the Republican primary. So legislators, you—you know, you become a state representative, then you run for the state Senate, and then as the state Senator, you begin to look to running for a constitutional office. And then you move from one to another. That's the real development of the party.

[00:41:59] JD: And I think that, you know, again, it's important to note that we're seeing election cycles now where there are several Republicans vying for positions within the primaries, and Democrats are the party that are almost struggling to maintain

basic viability numbers and requirements by getting somebody to run. And that is something that we've just never seen in this state. So in a relatively short order, you know, ten years, twenty years, we've seen a dramatic shift there. [00:42:26]

You had touched on President Trump, and how really this was—this began before President Trump. And we've talked about how President Obama's time in office sort of created, you know, either an opportunity or a problem or however you wanted to look at it, depending on the party, to reckon with some of the differences in a nationalized Democratic Party politics and a more localized, more conservative-to-moderate party politics perhaps. And that brand just wasn't wearing well anymore with Arkansans, and Republicans were in place to capitalize on that.

[00:43:06] How does a very wealthy New Yorker—how does he reach Arkansas conservative voters and not only win their hearts in [20]16, but actually even perform better in many places in Arkansas in 2020? Though he loses his race for reelection, he does really well in Arkansas. How does he relate to Arkansans in ways that other candidates in the past haven't?

[00:43:36] BV: I think it's—well, one, I think that the Trump phenomenon didn't start with Donald Trump in 2016. I think a lot of these folks in Arkansas are like a lot of folks throughout

the country. They've seen their institutions fail them at every level. They drive on bad roads. Their kids go to bad schools. They figure they work hard, they pay their taxes, they try to do the right thing, their brother or their son served in the United States military, or they served, and they look at their daughter who's gone off to Afghanistan. They had a general level of disgust with both parties, with politicians in both parties at the very highest levels of government. And they looked, and they didn't see anyone speaking their language. They could see Tom Cotton and think, "That's a guy that gets it, and he's going to try to change things." But they just—it was the same game played by the same people at the national level, Ds and Rs, it was just the political class. They looked at 'em all as one big grouping. And they'd lost confidence in that. [00:44:39] Along comes Donald Trump, and he gives a voice to what they're concerning. Now regardless of how you might feel about him, whether he was crude and horrible or whether he's the voice that you think was in the wilderness leading us out, he did give them a voice. And I think in much the same way that Reagan understood in 1980—you know, be positive, be—project positivity, come forward, let that attitude show. People can get behind a, you know, a former actor from California who'd been the governor

out there because he had an infectious nature to his campaign, and he had a broad message. Trump had a broad message that cut across state lines. The Trump voter in Arkansas and Pennsylvania is about the same guy. Then he was able to win over, I think, folks who just understood that maybe heading in the hard-left direction—my words, no one else's—in the hard-left direction for another four years wasn't gonna be the right thing to do for the country. And then they voted for Donald Trump. So I think it's that disenfranchisement that these voters had felt for a long period of time, and he gave a voice to them. And that's why he inspires the kind of loyalty that he inspires from people.

[00:46:00] JD: And of course, we see even in counties in 2020 where President Trump overperforms his [20]16 numbers. And in many of those counties, it's these Southern Arkansas, southeastern counties, in many cases, these traditional Delta counties or pine counties, you know, sort of pine-forest counties that we mentioned earlier, sort of these Old South counties was the term that I think we used. And we see with a large help, I think, from him being on the top of the ticket, those offices or those races, even, flip from Democrats who were probably more moderate lea—you know, sort of middle-of-the-road sort of

leaning partisans going for Republicans. And so we see even in his losing attempt for reelection in [20]20, he has a real positive effect, I think, a net positive effect for Republicans in the state.

[00:46:51] Much has been discussed about demographics in Southern states. And in many ways, as you've pointed out, you know, Arkansas's a Southern state, but then not entirely, you know, if we were to look at ourselves on a map. And demographically, our diversity does not really align with a lot of other Southern states. We don't have the really booming Latino population that we see in Texas, although we do have some growth there. And we've historically, really, since the great migration eras of the early 1900s, we've not had the significant portion of African Americans in our state that a lot of our Southern neighbors do. [00:47:27] So when we see states like Georgia that are becoming more battleground states, to use the term—Texas, I think, is the wish, dream of every, you know, Democratic strategist right now on the wish list, that eventually it'll turn purple, right. It may not go completely blue, but it'll be highly competitive. Where's Arkansas? Arkansas's late to the party. Arkansas was late in becoming a Republican state. The demographics, are they where they would need to be so that in twenty years we see sort of a more competitive state? Or you

know, do you think in twenty years we look just as do today or even more so Republican dominated?

[00:48:10] BV: I do—and I just don't say this as a partisan. I try to be as objective as I possibly can to say this. I do not see an avenue forward for at least another decade, most probably two, where Democrats can gain control again. That doesn't mean that a personality won't arise or—what I've always believed, for a Democrat to win in Arkansas, they would need to be self-funded. They would need to come along at exactly the right time. And they would need to be smart, charismatic, and be able to distinguish themselves away from the national party. That's going to be very difficult to do. It can happen, but that'll be very difficult to do. [00:48:46] Flipping those traditional Democratic legislative seats that have gone back the other way, gone toward the Republican Party, I think is almost impossible for a couple of reasons. One, we sit here on the cusp of redistricting the entire state of Arkansas from a legislative standpoint. A hundred and fifty years, I can tell you—Republicans have a pretty good memory on those kinds of things. [Laughter] Hard for me to imagine that maps won't be drawn that advantage Republicans even more going forward. And so I think that's one element that's there. And then two, I think you get a sense of the small-

town, medium-sized-town business person who could kinda vote for either one, but all the action's on the Republican side of things. And so what we find is that as people have to commit earlier in the process, you've got to pick the winner of, say, the Republican primary only. You don't get a chance then to wait around. And so you're already all in on somebody who's won a race already. And so that forces the hand of those Independents to vote inside the Republican primary, which I noted earlier. So I think those two things solidify the state legislature for a long period of time for Republicans. Might have a one off, like I said, a statewide race or something like that. [00:50:08] Democrats hurt themselves, and they have no one but themselves to blame. Arkansas is the only Southern state that never had a majority African American congressional district. And I think you pointed out, I mean, the numbers aren't significant, but they were significant enough for the Democratic Party to have drawn something like that. And they never did.

JD: The First could've been, I would think. Yeah, yeah.

BV: Correct. Exactly. And so as a result, there wasn't a statewide political leader for African Americans to coalesce behind to really bring that solid block that would show up in force and make that person a dominant politician on the statewide scene. And

because they didn't do that, it has diluted support, and therefore, you see what you see. And again, as I said, I think the redistricting and then sort of the—everyone has to—everyone's pushes their chips in early now because the Republican primary's the name of the game. Those two things, I think, probably will work in Republican's favor for at least another decade, for sure.

[00:51:13] JD: What I think I'm hearing from you is Arkansas, that had long been known nationally as a Democratic stronghold, stubbornly so, is now—with maybe one election cycle where maybe in hindsight we could look back and say, "Oh, it was—there were some tighter general election races." We're now back to really a familiar territory, but the different party, right, where the Republicans are the ones that are battling it out in spring, early summer in primaries, maybe earlier than that in a presidential year. The fall is a foregone conclusion at this point. And I think that makes Arkansas politics unique yet again, is that we went from one-party domination to one-party domination. We didn't have that era where you can say it was a really closely fought partisan race. I think that's very interesting.

[00:52:02] BV: We flipped so quickly, as you point out, and so

intensely. And I think it's so dug in now for a while that, you know, for, like I said, for at least the next decade or two, we'll see Republicans dominate. Now I don't believe [*laughs*] Republicans are going to dominate for 150 years. I think the shelf life for these things is gonna be cut in half every time. If the Republican Party, let's say from 2010 to 2030 or 2040 happens to have that long a great run, that'll be something, in my opinion. I think we're going to see these things start to happen faster. I don't know that they'll, to your point, happen with the kind of intensity that we saw things flip. I think we were at an intersection of those three issues that I described earlier. But I don't think—Democrats are not going to have to wait 120 more years to see an opportunity come up. I think it'll happen a lot faster than that.

[00:53:02] JD: So if we were to look at this time period, particularly, say, 2005 to 2015, and we were to try to explain what happened, what are we missing? What is the other thing that we need to be looking at to try to make sense of this historic pivot from one party to next?

[00:53:24] BV: It's—and I've read some polling data, and I've been a part of some projects that examined this. If you look 2004, President Bush was reelected. We're in the midst of fighting a

war in Iraq, we're in—and very quickly the fatigue had set in for folks who had supported President Bush. And of course, then in 2008 Mike Beebe's elected here. Democrats win in a landslide and kinda clean out what had been some Republican gains. But very quickly, thereafter, those very same folks who'd fought in the war or had lost someone or had had—had a real sense of patriotism still about themselves. And I believe they believe that they saw elements of the country turning away from that. And that is something that we've not really dug down in, into the real hard—the granular level on that kind of stuff. But I think they thought all this, all of our sacrifices, all our altruism as citizens—and they cherish things that you can't hold in your hand. It's honor and sacrifice and respect, those kinds of things. I feel like they began to look at some of the country and say, "No, this is not—that's not what we believe in here." And I'm not saying those are bad people. Not at all. I'm saying just the opposite. I think that they don't—it doesn't come from a mean spirited place, it just comes from a place where they've sacrificed and given service, and they would like to see those same sort of values honored. And they're not seeing them. [00:54:55]

Trump was—is very skillful. Was and is very skillful at saying—to your point about, how can a wealthy New Yorker suddenly

become the most popular politician in Arkansas? He's able to hold a mirror up to his opponents and say, "See, look at me and look at them. I'm what's separating—I'm what's standing between you and them." And he makes it a binary choice, and it's very effective. And I think it's something that was born out of what I just described, a level of patriotic altruism there from a lot of people who'd had a cousin or an uncle or someone pass away or someone be wounded. And they'd seen the plant close, and they'd seen those kinds of things happen, and they just doubled down on America. And then along comes Trump to say, "I'm with you. Look who they are." And that's—that fervor, that intensity, that's where I think a lot of that comes from.

[00:55:51] JD: Well, Bill Vickery, thank you so much.

BV: I have a very good—I'm probably going to get in trouble for most of what I've said here. But yeah.

JD: But on—you know, certainly, for me and on behalf of the Pryor Center, thank you so much for sitting down and talking with us today about this project and making sense of what truly is a historic moment in, I would say not even Arkansas history, but really American political history and is that dramatic shift that we saw in such short order in our state. Thank you very much for sitting down.

BV: Thank you. Thank you.

[End of interview 00:56:39]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]