

The Upcoming Presidential Election

What Happens Next - 03.16.2024

Larry Bernstein:

Welcome to What Happens Next. My name is Larry Bernstein.

What Happens Next is a podcast which covers economics, politics, and education.

Today's topic is the Upcoming Presidential Election. Our speaker is Henry Olsen who is a Senior Fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center and the author of two books: *The Working-Class Republican* and *The Four Faces of the Republican Party*.

I want to hear from Henry his review of Biden's performance in the State of the Union Address. And now that the primaries are finished, I want to know what important public policy issues will be front and center during the presidential campaign.

How important will Biden's age be a factor? Can Biden perform on the campaign trail? Will Trump be more professional in his interactions with the public? And will the abortion issue favor the Democrats even if Trump endorses the median voter desire for a sixteen-week abortion ban?

Buckle up!

Henry, I would like to begin with Joe Biden's State of the Union address. What did you think of it?

Henry Olsen:

He displayed a character that's unbecoming. He is an angry, elderly, partisan narcissist that is what came through. It seems that we're going to have doppelgangers running against one another, two peas in the same angry, narcissistic pod.

Larry Bernstein:

What surprised me was it came across as a campaign speech. And what is unusual about campaign speeches is that it is usually done only on your home court without having the opposite party right there. You had the Speaker of the House Johnson sitting there rolling his eyes. What did you make of the decision to turn the state of the union into a campaign speech?

Henry Olsen:

He seems to confuse his role as president with his role as head of the Democratic Party. And that is an erosion of democratic norms, which is something that ought to be criticized roundly but won't be.

Larry Bernstein:

President Obama attacked Justice Alito in his State of the Union address and that was a change in democratic norms. In this speech, Biden challenged the Dobbs opinion. How do you think about the ongoing assault of the Supreme Court in such a public way?

Henry Olsen:

It's one thing as a campaigner to criticize the court. It is another as president to criticize the court. And he is essentially saying that the Supreme Court has no legitimacy unless it agrees with the policy priorities of the Democratic Party.

President Biden in the state of the union turned to Republicans criticizing them for what many did after January 6 and say you cannot love democracy only when you win. The same is true for the rule of law. You cannot love the rule of law only when you win.

Larry Bernstein:

At one of my book clubs, Senator Lott mentioned that immediately after Clinton won his trial after the impeachment, Clinton sent Lott a box of cigars with a kind note. And Lott said on a personal basis, he really liked Bill Clinton and they got along very well.

The concern I have heard in Washington among the congressional leadership is that those warm personal feelings across the aisle are rare. I noticed that the vice president and the speaker were sitting next to each other. And there were a couple of times where the speaker was trying to have some personal interchange with the vice president, and he could not get anything going.

Henry Olsen:

I understand why Vice President Harris does not want to be seen on camera laughing and chumming it up with the Speaker of the House Johnson. On the other hand, her inability to rise to that moment is yet another testament to her weak political skills.

She is more afraid of an informal moment caught on camera or perhaps a hot mic than she is exercising normal human interaction and courtesies. What the ancient democracies could never fully grasp is the concept of the loyal opposition that you can fight by day but at night you are fellow citizens. And when you start to view your adversary as your enemy, you start to view them not as a citizen but as an "other." And when you have that, you cannot have a democracy because you cannot exchange power peacefully. That is the line that the President Trump crossed

with January 6th is the unwillingness to recognize that he lost and his persuasion of millions of people of that fact.

Larry Bernstein:

In the past, members of the opposition would be part of the cabinet. Henry Stimson was FDR's Secretary of War. In the Kennedy administration, he had Dillon at Secretary of Treasury also Dulles at the CIA. These were hardcore Republicans.

The English war cabinet would have the head of the opposition in the cabinet. And after October 7th in Israel, Netanyahu asked that the opposition leader not only join the cabinet but run the war. This seems inconceivable in our non-parliamentary system. How do you think about that becoming so uncommon now that you would never do such a thing?

Henry Olsen:

Even President Obama carried over Bob Gates, who was a Bush appointee as Secretary of Defense, replaced with Chuck Hagel, who was a Republican Senator. It starts with President Trump, there was no Democrat politician who served in cabinet. And I do not think Joe Biden has a Republican politician serving in his cabinet. So, it is extremely recent. To have nobody from the other side is yet another indication of how we are descending it to two warring camps, and you can't have a democracy when you have two warring camps.

Larry Bernstein:

One of Biden's weaknesses is his old age. And the purpose of this State of the Union address was to show that although old, he is experienced and that his age would not hold him back. How did you think he did to challenge the concerns about his age?

Henry Olsen:

He exceeded them; he displayed a lot of energy an ability to go off script and respond, which demonstrates mental agility. So, from that respect, mission accomplished. In other ways, though, you could see the real challenges that age poses to him that he seemed throughout the speech to confuse energy with anger. And starting maybe 30 minutes in, he started to cough a lot. This is somebody who used to be able to stand up and talk for hours without notes.

Larry Bernstein:

This campaign speech highlighted the issues that he is going to be running on. He opened with Dobbs, then he quickly moved to the strength of the economy. He listed out the military objectives and he tried to distinguish his temperament versus his predecessor. Can you go through the critical issues for this campaign.

Henry Olsen:

I think that's very shrewd, Larry, how you picked those particular issues and honed in that they are going to be central to the campaign. Effectively, what he is going to say is that he's brought the economy back from the brink and that things are good. Inflation is coming down; jobs are going up. He will talk about Donald Trump as being opposed to abortion rights. And those are good issues for Democrats to run on.

Then you have got the question of immigration. This is an issue where most Americans side with Donald Trump. That when Donald Trump left office, a clear majority did not want to build a wall on the southern border and today a majority do that shows that minds have changed in four years because of Joe Biden's policies.

We now see clearly what the Democratic argument is going to be. We can divine what Donald Trump's argument is going to be and where the persuadable middle will come down. This is going to be a battle between two capable if narcissistic adversaries; two parties roughly equal in strength.

Larry Bernstein:

Most political science theorists are interested in the median voter on issues. Taking the abortion issue, where is the median voter? When you see surveys, most Americans do not oppose the banning of abortion and a super majority also do not want abortion on demand. Let's assume that the median voter supports abortion up to 16 weeks. And Trump put out a trial balloon that he would like to pass a bill at the 16-week level.

Normally what we would expect the Congress to match the median voter and propose that bill. But in conversations with both sides, neither party is proposing that median legislation. Trump, from a political perspective, may wisely be choosing that median. He may take it on the campaign trail as a compromise. And that will put Biden in a tougher position to run on if Trump is saying, I want 16 weeks, and Biden is forced to take an abortion on demand position. In the last couple of elections, abortion has played perfectly into the Democrats hands. Does this change in strategy on the part of the Republicans take the issue off the table for the Democrats?

Henry Olsen:

The pro-life lobby wants what Lindsey Graham introduced last session, which is a national ban above 15 weeks, but permits state bans below 15.

A 15-week ban is something the Democrats cannot accept, even though the median voter supports it, because their base opposes it.

The problem for Trump is going to be, does he adopt the pro-life preference, or does he run against it? One can imagine Donald Trump saying, we're going to have a nationwide solution that says abortion rights advocates win up until the 15th week. And I am going to undo all those laws in Texas and Georgia and so forth that have six week or 12-week bans. But you Democrats must give up your ultra-liberal laws in New York and California and so forth. That would be where the median voter is. But then Trump would alienate his base because the Republicans base who want to ban abortion somewhere in the first trimester. Trump is caught between the devil and the deep blue sea.

Larry Bernstein:

Do you think Trump has more degrees of freedom because his base has nowhere to go? And we've had something like 16-weeks before for a generation. Can they live with that and not and still show up to vote? The evangelical has nowhere else to go.

Henry Olsen:

Donald Trump will be given a great amount of leeway by his base, but his base has red lines too, and a bill that would undo state bans on abortion before the 15th week would not be accepted by them, which is one reason why Donald Trump has been very coy so far. He has been signaling to the middle, but he has not been specific, and that keeps his base in line.

During a campaign, if he maintains some degree of vagueness, they will go along with him enthusiastically because they have nowhere else to go. And because he did deliver the justices that overturned Roe with the Dobbs case, and they are grateful to him for that.

Larry Bernstein:

What you are describing is a very thoughtful, politically astute, highly professional Trump and Trump campaign. Do you think Trump can behave in such a professional way on the campaign trail? Does he have a professional staff? Is he better at staying on message and being politically clever and astute? I have not watched any of his campaign speeches, but the small clips that I have seen on television, he has no notes. What do you make of this seemingly more professional, more experienced Trump campaigner?

Henry Olsen:

The campaign is professional. The campaign knows how to frame issues and deliver messages in a way that are effective. He did not have that in 2016 or in 2020. So, on the campaign side, you will see a degree of professionalism and seriousness that you have never seen in the Trump campaign. There is a degree of spontaneity and audience interaction that leads him down certain roads that other professional politicians would not go on. But you will see a more professional, more focused, less rambunctious, less schizoid Trump than you saw in 2016 or 2020.

Larry Bernstein:

In the 2020 presidential election, Biden ran his campaign from a bunker. This time he has the benefit of both the Oval Office and presidential activities that contrast with Trump speaking without notes in front of an adoring crowd. Will Biden run like Trump in front of large audiences and big public speeches?

Henry Olsen:

Biden will differ from Trump in two ways. One, everything Biden does will be scripted. There will not be off-the-cuff interaction that is the hallmark of a Trump rally. Secondly, he will probably only do one speech a day, whereas Trump will do multiple speeches a day. And given his unscripted, interactive elements, he does not have to memorize four different speeches in a day, he just riffs like a jazz musician.

Biden will not run from the bunker. He will not run from the Oval Office, but he will not be as unscripted or as physically and energetic as Trump will in the campaign. If I were Trump, I would start to talk about it. "How can you expect this guy to be president when all he can do is stand up, give a speech that somebody else wrote where he reads it and then he goes home, and he can only do it once a day. I know this job. I did this job. It is the toughest job in the world. I can do it. I can talk to people. I can think. I have the energy. I have the agility. Joe Biden doesn't." That is what I would start hammering.

Larry Bernstein:

Let's go to the immigration issue next. The Democrats are very worried about it. And they thought that maybe they could pass a bipartisan bill here and claim victory. They are denied that blaming it on the Republicans. How do you think immigration will play from both sides?

Henry Olsen:

The immigration issue is huge. It is not going away, and it plays in favor of the Republicans. It is that Biden remains caught by a problem of his own making, which is his base wants what is going on the border. In fact, what they would prefer is that immigration be more organized and legal, but they are perfectly happy to have what is happening on the border because they believe in unrestricted immigration.

And what Biden's tried to do is what he does on every issue, which he tries to say within the Democratic coalition. He could have his bipartisan deal tomorrow but what he must anger his progressive base.

The median voter would love that. Half of the Democratic party would love that. Half of the Democratic party would not. And Joe Biden has never been willing to stand up to his base. As a result, what you are going to see is an issue that will increasingly play in the Republicans' favor.

When you contrast this with the Ukraine situation, which is if Joe Biden really believes what he says about Ukraine, he should be giving Republicans more on the border to make that bill pass tomorrow. He is hoping that enough Republicans will break that he can have his cake and eat it too. And we will see whether that happens.

Larry Bernstein:

In the State of the Union, Biden discussed the current war in Gaza. He opened with a long preamble that Israel had a legitimate response to the hostages and the killings, but that the current war does not fit within what is acceptable. His response is nuanced, that it is time for a ceasefire. I have got a hostage deal I can negotiate. And this current operation and government in Israel is illegitimate.

Henry Olsen:

Biden is playing to his Democratic Party base while trying not to pull the rug out from under Israel. But he demonstrates a lack of leadership is that his modus operandi, is to identify where all the strands are in the Democratic Party base and try and bring them together. That only works when the choices can be compromised and you either are for the continuation of the current circumstances or you are not. And in Israel, you are either willing to support the Israeli government and their belief that Hamas must be destroyed, or you are not. I think what Biden is doing is weakening our ties to Israel.

When Biden says stuff like that, you must ask does he know that this is impossible in a democratic state, or does he not care? What Biden is increasingly doing is following his Democratic Party, which does not want to support Israel if supporting Israel means supporting Israeli interests as Israelis define them. Biden will not say it. Like many people, he wants to be in denial about the logical consequence of his principles. But what he is doing is following the Democratic Party voter and moving his party away from any serious alliance with Israel because his conditions for that alliance are conditions that no elected Israeli government can fulfill.

Larry Bernstein:

I want to talk about your book, *The Four Faces of the Republican Party*.

Henry Olsen:

The Four Faces of the Republican Party, which I co-wrote in 2015, tries to understand the voter dynamics of the Republican Party primary voters. And what I said was that there are four groups: very conservative secular voters, very conservative religious voters, somewhat conservatives, and moderates.

The very conservative secular voter is the old guard who focus on liberty, lower taxes, smaller government, and constitutional conservatism. The very conservative religious voter are the people who care about abortion, same sex marriage, and religious liberty. They tend to be heavily evangelical, but there are some heavily religious Catholics who are part of this as well. The somewhat conservative voter is always the center of public opinion in the Republican party. These are the people who agreed with conservatives on some issues but tended to be temperamentally inclined towards stability. They liked the Mitt Romneys rather than the firebrands. And the moderates are the opposites of evangelicals. You tell me what an evangelical like and the moderate wants the other thing. These are people who were the pro-choice wing of the Republican party. They would be more interested in balancing the budget than cutting taxes. These are people who are still not reconciled to the Reagan revolution.

Pre-Trump, it was about 30 to 35% of the two very conservative wings, but with the evangelical wing at about 25% of the party and the secular wing at about 10% of the party, which is why you always saw the conservative Christian beating the conservative neo-libertarian in primaries early on. The moderate wing was about 25 to 30% of the party nationally.

In the Donald Trump era the moderate wing has shrunk. It is probably now 15 to 20% nationwide in all the states where it used to have 30%.

Larry Bernstein:

There has been a change in the composition within the Republican Party in the last eight years. How does that happen? Did people change their views or did some people exit the Republican Party and new people enter the Republican Party who have different views than those that exited?

Henry Olsen:

Some people change their views, but mostly it was a composition question, which is that Donald Trump brought a lot of former Democrats, many were general election Republican voters but not primary election Republican voters. They got energized by Trump and suddenly wanted to get active in the party. And many moderates left.

Larry Bernstein:

As you look back at the Republican primaries using your paradigm, what happened?

Henry Olsen:

Donald Trump did something that has not been done in the modern era is that he built a base among the very conservatives and built out from that to dominate the somewhat conservatives. Nikki Haley won moderates. But she got annihilated among very conservative voters. Donald Trump would have lost if Nikki Haley had been able to convince the somewhat conservative

voter to back her. Instead, she lost them by 20 to 40 points, depending on the state. And that shows that the person who 10-15 years ago would have favored stability over vociferousness, now favors vociferousness over stability.

Nikki Haley was trying to win the nomination of the 2012 Republican Party and what she decisively showed was that the 2012 Republican Party does not exist anymore.

Larry Bernstein:

If you had asked political analysts a year ago what Donald Trump's chances of winning the Republican primary are, they would have been cautious. They said January 6th had permanently tarnished his brand, that his erratic behavior in office would not stand well with the Republican primary voter, that indictments were problematic. I do not think any political analysts thought that Trump would win in a runaway. How did this happen? Why were the political strategists so wrong?

Henry Olsen:

Since the midterm debacle of 2022, a significant number of people who had been saying, I will support Donald Trump for renomination in the summer of 2022 were going to back Florida Governor Ron DeSantis. The Donald Trump who was campaigning in the early part of 2023 was not energetic, was not persuasive in the way that Trump can be.

And a couple of things happened. One is that the indictments came in and that drove some people back to Trump saying, well, if the liberals want to use what conservatives call "lawfare" to take Trump away from me, I am going to own the libs and say, well, you can't take away my cake. The other thing that happened was they re-energized Trump. The Trump after the indictments is the old Trump. The Trump after the indictments is somebody whose heart and mind is in the game in a way that it was not in early 2023.

The only person who could have beaten Trump was Ron DeSantis because he was the only person who had credibility with the super majority of the party that once a MAGA style conservative, but DeSantis was lackadaisical on the campaign trail.

Larry Bernstein:

Our primary system is hugely beneficial to both political parties. And the Democrats wasted their primaries but that is the incumbent so no big surprise there. The Republican primaries were helpful is that you see which candidates are ready for prime time and which are not. And the debates and the interaction with the press and with the voters quickly shows who is of a certain caliber. You just discussed that Ron DeSantis was disappointing and was not ready for prime time. He did not work a crowd properly. His message was flat. His strategy was poor. He showed no pizzazz, and he sank like a rock. We had a bunch of other guys, what did

you think of their performances and what did it show about themselves and the Republican Party?

Henry Olsen:

I've never thought Mike Pence was ready for prime time because he is unimaginative and lacks charisma. And he displayed all those qualities on the debate stage and in his performances and consequently showed that the vice presidency was as far as he was ever going to go.

Chris Christie, I still think he wakes up at night in a cold sweat saying, if only I had said yes in 2011 when Republican donors were begging him to run against Mitt Romney. He's going to be the man who goes to his grave knowing he could have been president. Not that he would have been, but he could have been president and that he alone chose not to be president. He shows a lot of great skills, but his time passed and the message he was making was not one Republicans wanted to hear.

Then you get to the two interesting people, which is Tim Scott and Vivek Ramaswamy. Ramaswamy showed a lot of skill at getting attention and niche marketing. Who had heard of Ramaswamy 18 months ago? Nobody, that takes skill. But he also showed limited appeal.

The other person who's interesting is Tim Scott. And this is a person who clearly showed he wasn't ready for prime time. Tim when he's delivering a set speech, he doesn't engage with voters or critical questions, Tim Scott shines when he was on television, he was beginning to rise in Iowa because that's a set piece and it was played to his strength. Nikki Haley ate him for lunch in debates. He appeared unnuanced in dealing with questions in candidate form, retreating to talking points and voters picked up on that. And by showing he wasn't ready for prime time, he dropped out by December.

Larry Bernstein:

In 2016, Trump chose Mike Pence as VP because he wanted to show his conservative bona fides. Today, that wing of the party is his strength.

What he needs to do is reach out to moderates in the Republican Party, independent voters, if he's being strategic. Nikki Haley has shown that she is ready for prime time. But she has antagonized the beast. Do you think Trump can pick Haley as his vice-presidential candidate?

Henry Olsen:

I don't think he will. And I don't think Haley would accept at this point. If he were to come out and say, I support Ukraine in its fight with Russia. I do not want a war, but Putin chose it and we're going to win it. If he were to change his tune or could give her an opening to accept a vice presidential nomination. But absent that she would be viewed as somebody who surrendered

everything that she said in the later stages of the campaign trail. And I don't think that she'll do that.

The question is will he choose Haley Light? Somebody with appeal to that demographic, but somebody who does not have the peculiar issues that arose in the last six weeks of the campaign. What about Marco Rubio? Rubio is somebody who has not criticized Trump. Rubio and Haley support largely overlaps and Rubio is somebody who has successfully straddled the line between establishment, Republicanism and MAGAism.

The big question for him is, is he going to do what in 1992, Bill Clinton did? Clinton doubled down on young New Democrat by picking Al Gore. Will Trump want to double down on MAGA and pick somebody who's 20 to 30 years younger than him? One person who would be in that direction, who could play both roles at the same time would be Elise Stefanik, a person who served in the Bush administration and has respect on the establishment wing, but who has thrown her career in MAGAism.

Larry Bernstein:

What I noticed is Trump runs processes like his TV show The Apprentice. And he says, I cannot make up my mind. Here's what I am thinking. Here are the four candidates I'm thinking about and I am interested in what you the Republican Party voters think. And I am totally open. I am throwing it out there. Who do you want? And then there is this huge public debate. If he does go that route, who would he pick?

Henry Olsen:

What he should do is make it a formal Apprentice structure have four to six people. He says, here is my shortlist. And then what he does is spend a week on the campaign trail with each of them. And he gets to test them out at rallies. He gets to assess which people generate more applause. How do they play online? It would be, but it would be entertaining, and Donald Trump is nothing if not an entertainer.

Larry Bernstein:

I end each episode with a note of optimism. Henry, what are you optimistic about as it relates to this upcoming presidential campaign?

Henry Olsen:

I am optimistic about that it will be over. I do not think this is going to be a positive campaign. Half of the country will be enraged no matter who wins. I am optimistic that after we get through this, that the need for unification will be even more obvious Whoever wins cannot run again because they will be termed out. Whoever loses will be too old to run again. So, in 2028, a new generation will be the presidential nominees. And then the question is, will Americans want to

end this division in compromise. And it can be a compromise that's center-left or MAGA-esque but not MAGA pure. But one that reaches out to people in the other side's coalition. That is 2028 but not about 2024.

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks, Henry, for joining us today.

If you missed our previous podcast the topic was Encouraging Civil Discourse on Campus. Our speaker was Steve Lewis who was formerly the President of Carleton College and the Provost at Williams. Steve described constructive steps that a university president should make to facilitate a healthy conversation on campus on provocative and highly charged topics. Steve believes that a college must develop a social contract among students and faculty to foster free speech.

Steve is disappointed that the tenured faculty have not taken the lead on this issue. And we reviewed the proper role of university trustees, and whether they should be the ones pursuing university speech neutrality by defining the rules of the road.

I would like to make a plug for next week's podcast with Bethany McClean for her new book that she co-authored entitled the Big Fail which is about what lessons have we learned from the COVID pandemic. We have some time distance from the catastrophe, and now is the time to review what we did wrong, so we can learn how to handle public health disasters in the future.

You can find our previous episodes and transcripts on our website whathappensnextin6minutes.com. Please subscribe to our weekly emails and follow us on Apple Podcasts or Spotify.

Thank you for joining us today, good-bye.