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

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Blue to Red Oral History Project

Hal Bass

Interviewed by John C. Davis

July 1, 2021

Little Rock, Arkansas

Objective

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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.

Citation Information

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John C. Davis interviewed Hal Bass on July 1, 2021, in Little Rock, Arkansas.

[00:00:00]

John C. Davis: Here with me today is Dr. Hal Bass, Professor Emeritus at Ouachita Baptist University in political science. Hal has been an observer and a politico for decades now in the state of Arkansas, has regularly appeared in weekly news coverage programming in the state talking about not only the state's political actors but also the national political scene for quite some time. On behalf of the Pryor Center, thank you so much for sitting down with me today, Hal.

Hal Bass: Glad to be here.

[00:00:34] JD: And what we're going to talk about today is, more broadly, is the modern history of the Republican Party in Arkansas. We're gonna focus our—particularly focus in on the era between 2005 and 2015. We see this historical growth in GOP success, electorally speaking, where we have a party that is, in 2005, still a party of fits and starts and successes and failures but no real momentum, to a party in 2015 that captures all constitutional offices at the state level, both Senate seats, of course, all four US House seats, and supermajorities in the General Assembly. We effectively, as you know, go from a

famous one-party state that's studied by V. O. Key and many others and—to another one-party state just more recently. We had very little time to be a state where the elections were in doubt in the general elections. We are back in an era where, with exception of only a few places in the state, primaries largely are settling out who will take office in January of that next year. [00:01:45] So I'm thrilled to have you sit down with me today and talk about what you've seen in Arkansas politics and where you see it going in the future. What I've done to try to explain sort of the scope of the study is I've tried to categorize the Republican Party and what I'll call the modern Republican Party in three generations. [00:02:06] And the first one I sort of catalog as that first generation between 1966 with Winthrop Rockefeller's first electoral success for governor, first Republican since Reconstruction elected in the state of Arkansas, to 1992. Could be early [19]90s. Maybe not 1992, but [19]92, of course, is when we see a governor from Arkansas in our state, Bill Clinton, ascend to DC. It's also when we start to see some really unexpected, unforeseen movement in state politics with Mike Huckabee becoming lieutenant governor in a special election, of course later on becoming governor to serve for over ten years. It's also when we start to see the Republican Party make some

strides, electorally speaking, and capitalize on—at that point it would've been decades long—growing—either resentment towards the national Democratic brand with Arkansans or just a growing affinity for Republican presidential candidates that we had seen for some time during that era. [00:03:09] The second generation is [19]93 to 2010. And that's that period where I think we do start to see the Republican Party have more success, at least in recruiting some talent. We see our first US Senator who's a Republican elected in [19]96 with Tim Hutchinson. We see again fits and starts of successes, some members in the US House, a increasing number of legislators that were Republican during that era, but still solidly a minority party. We're at a time period then, in the [19]90s and the early 2010s, where we're thinking eventually, eventually, the dam will break, and we'll be like our Southern neighbors and in the Midwest and see Republican Party gains that are lasting. [00:03:56] But really after 2010 and certainly to today is when we see this just historic shift in partisanship in the state of Arkansas. So the Pryor Center, again, is looking at this in a little finer, narrower scope between [20]05 and [20]15, but they're sort of looking at the larger era as well. And your political memory in Arkansas extends to at least the 1970s, so you're

able to capture for us a portion of all three of those generations. [00:04:25] So thinking back to the second half of the 1970s when you go on the campus of Ouachita Baptist University there in Arkadelphia, what is your earliest political memory in Arkansas?

[00:04:39] Hal Bass: We moved here in August of 1976 from Tennessee. And of course, that was the year that Jimmy Carter was running for president, and certainly the Baptist connection was very, very profound on the Ouachita campus. Carter was promising to reassemble a more traditional Democratic Party support in the South, and did so initially and ephemerally. At the state level, Governor Pryor was finishing up his first term and getting ready to get reelected to his second term. Bill Clinton was running for attorney general. One of the things that I very quickly realized that Arkansas was a small state, and national political figures and state political figures were easy to come by in terms of their visibility and their accessibility. I remember the first time I met Clinton was he came to campus in his attorney general campaign that year.

[00:05:57] JD: That's great. So in [19]76 also, it marks the year that—it's the last year that a non-Arkansas-native Democrat is selected b—among Arkansans to this point. And Jimmy Carter,

of course, does very well in Arkansas in [19]76, loses narrowly in 1980. A pretty small percentage difference there. [00:06:20] So you're coming—you know, and you've mentioned even in that brief moment, too, of the Big Three, which we'll get back to here in a little bit, but you know, really a moment where—well, you know, in your own words, what does the Republican Party look like in the late 1970s?

[00:06:39] HB: You mentioned it in your introductory remarks. It had gone through an initial surge that was completely spent by the time I got here, and the Republican Party was very much the junior partner in terms of politics and policy in the state. You had the pocket of support up in Northwest Arkansas that had been electorally significant since the [19]60s and really culturally significant since the Civil War. But as far as traction in the rest of the state, once the Rockefeller surge had receded, it was simply hard to find outside of the state. Now again, it'll pick up very quickly. There'll be some successes with Ed Bethune in the Second District. [00:07:47] One of the things that I observed during those years in what you would call the first era was kind of a fire-and-fallback presence for the Republican Party. There'd be a surge, and that would stimulate the dominant Democratic Party to get its act together and counter the surge and prevail.

And it seemed to me that was kind of the pattern. The Republicans would make a move forward, Democrats would regroup and recapture the high ground, and that kind of went back and forth, really, extending into your second period until the end of, you know, 2010, which kind of marked the end of that pattern.

[00:08:40] JD: I'm thinking of Frank White, 1980, beating a young Bill Clinton after his first term as Governor. Now, whether it was—or Frank White, sorry. Whether it was Frank White and his appeal or if it was more of a vote against, you know, Clinton to sort of teach him a lesson, you see that one-term, two-year interruption, right, in a decades-long tenure as governor.

HB: And it's a signal the Democratic hold on the electorate is weakening, but by no means eroded during those years.

[00:09:18] JD: So we've talked a little bit about—you'd mentioned David Pryor and Bill Clinton. There's literature out there—Diane Blair and others have written about the Big Three. Could you talk to me a little bit about the Big Three and then how they may have played a role, perhaps, as it's been argued, in sort of prolonging Democratic dominance in the state?

[00:09:40] HB: Yeah. One of the big questions that you mentioned in your introduction is why did Arkansas take so long to end up

where we are, when most of our Southern contemporary states, contemporaneous states, had made that move years and decades earlier? And one explanation that Diane Blair put forward had to do with the presence and the longevity of those three very, very popular figures in the state: Dale Bumpers, David Pryor, and Bill Clinton, and that their goodwill among the Arkansas electorate kept the Democratic Party insulated from this rising Republican tide. And I think the there's something to that. I think it's a plausible explanation. All three were very popular, all three were very skilled, and all three were able to bridge, I think, an ideological and cultural gap within the Arkansas electorate in their widespread appeal. They were very hard to put into a narrow compartment. They had broad, broad appeal. Now I think there's more to the story than personality, but I do think those three figures and, again, their extraordinary longevity and popularity does partially explain the Democratic Party's ability to persist in a—here when we were losing—the Democrats were losing ground elsewhere.

[00:11:33] JD: And if we think about Bumpers and Pryor and Clinton, we're really talking about an era that begins in the [19]60s and really continues into, you know, early 2000s, 2001. Such a long segment of time in our state's modern political

history with at least one, and sometimes all three, in office is really quite something. [00:11:56] When we're talking about that long time period, you know, one thing that comes to mind on the Republican side is that they lacked, really, a standard bearer for a considerable amount of time with exception of John Paul Hammerschmidt, which is, as you've mentioned, is in a portion of the state, is in a regional—in Northwest Arkansas that had had a history of sort of independence or Republican, certainly, ideology or loyalties over Democrats. With exception of that area though, right, it was largely sort of a traditional Southern Democratic political environment. So Hammerschmidt is elected in the [19]60s, serves for a very long time, has a distinguished career in the house of—US House of Representatives, but he's not a statewide figure. [00:12:45] And we can really only point to perhaps Mike Huckabee, who comes into office under unusual circumstances as a lieutenant governor and then even more unusual circumstances as a governor, and is the first Republican to serve in a statewide office for as long as he did, over ten years, slightly over ten years. What do you think that did for the Republican Party? So you're—we're looking at the mid-1990s into the mid-2000s with, for the first time, really, an elected Republican in the modern

era.

[00:13:21] HB: Well, I think the way I would go about explaining it would be to think of—and first that the Republican surge in the state was limited regionally in the sense that where they got strongest was where they were already strong, Northwest Arkansas. That growth of the Republican Party in the Northwest quadrant was very significant in those early, early years. If you look at vote totes coming out of that Congressional district in the presidential votes and in the gubernatorial votes and the like, Republican primaries were decided in Northwest Arkansas. [00:14:09] But it's kind of gilding the lily. The Republican Party was unable to extend outside of that core constituency, regional constituency. I think Huckabee's contribution was to do what no one since Winthrop Rockefeller had been able to do, and that is give the Republican Party more statewide traction here. And going beyond Winthrop Rockefeller, what he was able to do was connect the urban Republican presence, Central Arkansas, business industry, and the like, with the traditional Northwestern Arkansas regional presence, with the rest of the state. And it was his statewide appeal that I think was, in a personalistic sense, very critical in giving the Republicans a statewide identity.

[00:15:09] JD: And not to give, you know, Frank White short shrift,

but it's a single, two-year term. We go back before him, we look at Rockefeller, and we compare the coalitions between Rockefeller and Huckabee, and Rockefeller's coalition is progressives, Democrats tired of machine politics, African Americans, and then that cadre of Republicans that you've spoken about that had just long been Republicans, but they were small in number. And so I think of that juxtaposition as well, where Huckabee's tenure is, you know, one of more moderate to conservative Republicans and even some Democrats voting for him, but as far as ideologically speaking, it seems to be a little bit more in line with what we would think of when we think of the Republican Party in Arkansas. Any thoughts on that?

[00:16:04] HB: It's just that I think Rockefeller's singular presence—he is a New Yorker, and his Republican identity is a national and Northeastern Republican identity. He's nothing like what emerged as the Southern Republican Party in the post-civil rights era. Huckabee's a product of the latter here, and I think that's the difference. If you look at the repub—Rockefeller's appeal was, as you indicated, very much what progressive Republicans in the Northeast had been trying to do in 1900, or were trying to do in 1900, and found some traction here in Arkansas, virtually alone in the South, because of Rockefeller in the 1960s. But

that model for Republican Party growth, the Rockefeller model, had no, again, traction outside the state in the region and had no attraction inside the state once Rockefeller passed from the scene. He wa—that's why I say he was a singular figure in that development.

[00:17:20] JD: I've had even someone, and I think it was a very fair critique—I was talking about and I was referencing this project, and I said, "the modern Republican Party," and the person looked at me and said, "I don't think the modern Republican Party is in the 1960s." And I said, "Oh, well"—you know, and I sort of explained sort of what I meant, but said, you know, "Where do you think it was?" And the person couldn't quite land on a date, but I think really what they saw as the modern Republican Party was probably around 1980 and probably looking at the ascendance of Ronald Reagan on the national scene, the party platform making really a clean departure from the Rockefeller years into a more conservative type of politics, much like what we might see today. [00:18:08] And I've thought about that more, and there may be something really to that, this idea that, you know, Rockefeller was such an anomaly, really, that he's separate from the brand of the party. And so I've just—you know, do you think there's—is there a significant

election cycle or a significant year you think you could look back on, you know, like an [19]80 or something, and say that's really when we start to see, maybe not the success that the Arkansas Republican party is wanting to see, but they're starting to see the—they're building their brand, if you will, of politics?

] 00:18:43] HB: I think—yeah, and I think 1980 is a good marker, but I think the real issue here is the inability of the Arkansas Democrats, apart from Bumpers, Pryor, and Clinton, to effectively separate themselves from the national Democrats. And that has been increasingly a problem for the Democratic Party. I think it's as much the Democrats lost as the Republicans won here, in the sense that the Democrats—and certainly, you know, Beebe falls in the tradition of Bumpers, Pryor, and Clinton, but there's no coattails beyond Beebe to carry that forward. [00:19:39] And it just came—became harder and harder. And I think part of that is the media, the rise of a national media, that makes it harder and harder for the Arkansas Democratic politic—politicos to separate themselves from what had always been, at least since the New Deal, unpopular in the National Democratic Party. The Republicans were the beneficiaries of that, I guess, erosion of identity and loyalty with the National Democrats.

[00:20:21] JD: When I think, you know, of national media, a brand, there's sort of a nationalization to our politics . . .

HB: Yeah.

JD: . . . that we're seeing even at the state and local levels. And I wonder—there's this idea, this notion out there that Bill Clinton leaving for DC may have hurt Democrats in that he took talent with him. At the same time, I could see the alt—on the other hand, him being the figurehead of the party, nationally speaking, made it harder, perhaps, for Republicans to make inroads in Arkansas and say "You know, well, there's this national, liberal brand that you really don't identify with. You might identify with it as a Democrat because your grandparents were Democrats, but they're different now," when you've got someone that had been elected multiple times in Arkansas at the—you know, in the White House, but you know, effectively the head of the Democratic Party for a decade, more or less, nationally speaking. [00:21:20] So him leaving in [20]01 does create sort of this bubble, right. And I—do you think there's anything to that, just basically the effect of who's in the White House? I'm thinking mainly of also—you know, Barack Obama, the unpopularity that President Obama drew out of Arkansas voters, if there was something there where you could see a Clinton there and say,

"Well, they weren't—the national party is not that different from me," and you have someone such as a Barack Obama in office, and you say, "Oh, there's no tie, there's no relation."

[00:21:56] HB: Sure. I think that Huckabee's campaign for lieutenant governor, which he narrowly won, you know, in the special election, very much focused on the idea of the Clinton machine. And I think he was a successful brander of the Democratic Party, and I think with—in his ability to connect the state Democrats to the Clinton scandals that were emerging on the national front. So in that sense, I do think, you know, Clinton did, in his absence, undermine Democratic Party strength in the state. I think that, again, it was overplayed, there was not much there. But there was enough there to fuel the separation. And again, as you indicated, it was harder for the national—for Arkansas Democrats to separate themselves from the national party when their favorite son was the party leader. [00:23:16] And I think what we haven't mentioned in this discussion so far was the increasing role of the religious right, which Huckabee was a product of, in drawing support for the Republican Party, the mobilization of the Southern evangelicals, a very strong presence in Arkansas, which, you know, had not been a noteworthy factor in the old Democratic Party, you know,

coalition in terms of identity. It was there nominally, but I think that became very, very visible and visceral in the early Clinton years here. And the whole—you know, while Clinton retains to this day a residual of support in the state, absence did not make the heart grow fonder here. And certainly you saw that with Hillary.

[00:24:26] JD: When did you begin to see the early stages of this partisan shift? You know, we see it materialize certainly out front, wide open for everyone to see around 2010, 2012, [20]14. When can you pinpoint a time when you say, "That was the moment it was all changing?"

[00:24:45] HB: Well, I think, in hindsight, the 2008 election where Beebe is still very popular, David Pryor—excuse me, Mark Pryor is still very popular, and Obama just gets clobbered here was the signal to me that it was gonna be harder and harder for the Democrats to maintain their state dominance going forward. But I confess, it wasn't, you know, as clear as [*laughs*] it probably should have been at the time. That's where hindsight, you know, kicks in. But I see kind of 2008 and then the 2010 elections as the turning point, but the foundation is laid in the 2008. Now again, before then, it's like you see it coming, it's just you wonder why it hadn't come yet, and that's where, you

know, the personalistic explanations and the economic explanations and the cultural explanations all kick in. But I think, you know, 2008–2010, that cycle strikes me as the critical one.

[00:26:07] JD: So you mentioned, you know, 2008 and the election of Barack Obama, president of the United States. Polling would clearly indicate that Arkansans really, from day one, disapproved of President Obama. And whether it was policy or some sort of personal attribute, race, sort of a—in an academic sort of, you know, way. Maybe not quite as personable, or maybe he wasn't able to connect with rural voters in the way that we would typically want—expect to see if you're an Arkansan. What is it, do you think, that really led to that time period being this time period that you think you see the shift? I mean, is it Obama, mainly, and if so, what was it do you think that led to that?

[00:26:57] HB: I think the Obama persona in all its complexity was simply alien to your modal Arkansas voter there. He's urban, we're rural. He's highly educated, we less so. Again, he's cosmopolitan, we're more provincial. He just did not connect. And I do think that, again, nationalization of politics made that disconnect more profound here, made it more compelling, and the lack of a Democratic bench as the Big Three era was coming

to an end or had come to an end by then.

[00:27:53] JD: Even before then—and you alluded to this earlier that the loyalty to the Democratic brand was waning among Arkansans, Arkansas voters, and a large portion of Arkansans had preferred for a long time to identify as Independents. And we knew what that probably really meant was that they'd vote for maybe a Republican presidential candidate, and then virtually everywhere else down ticket, it would be Democratic. That starts to change over time, of course. What do you think that was, that sort of independence—veneer really of an Independent voter? Was it generational? There was just less of a tie to the party, the Democratic Party at that time, or was it, you know, was it something the Republicans were simply doing better than the Democrats to engage voters?

[00:28:41] HB: I do think, maybe not alone, but unusual among the Southern Democratic states, there always was a sense—there long was a sense of independence in the self-perception of the Arkansas voter. And I look to the [19]68 election as being the stereotypical example there, where Rockefeller wins a second term, Fulbright wins whatever it was, a fourth term, and George Wallace wins the electoral votes in the state. And I think that that kind of established, if not extended, in the Arkansas mind

an identity that we are not simply yellow dog Democrat folks, that we are different from the other states in that we do have this independent streak that's less—that continued to manifest itself, at least psychologically, both individually and collectively going forward. [00:29:54] But I do think also, if you'll, you know, recall just from the broader literature, we weren't the Lone Rangers on ticket splitting in the [19]60s. Ticket splitting was, in general—you know, candidate-centered politics was on the rise in the [19]60s and into the [19]70s. And you can say Arkansas was maybe in the forefront of that, but we were part of a much larger trend in that kind of acceptance of legitimacy for ticket splitters here. There's nothing to be condemned and much to be admired in that, is the mentality there. And I think it did carry forward, and you saw guys like Frank White, you know . . .

JD: Sure.

HB: . . . benefiting from it. But it became harder and harder for conservative Democrats to find traction within the Democratic coalition in those years, and that's the realignment that eventually came forth.

[00:31:07] JD: Hal, you studied primaries, and particularly primaries in Arkansas. Can you share just a brief history of how primaries

happened or did not happen in Arkansas during this, you know, three-generational era that I've posed? And then I guess a follow up would be, you know, how—and if so what role did they play in the state's politics being what it is today?

[00:31:35] HB: Well, I think that when I came here, a Democratic primary could very easily and even likely attract more voters than a general election would. It was the ballgame here. And in turn, the Republican Party did not always have primaries. When they did have primaries, the participation was very low and almost nonexistent outside of Northwest Arkansas. I used to know, I'd have to go back and check, but it was in what we could certainly broadly call the modern era before we ever saw 100,000 people participate in the Republican primary.

JD: Not that long ago.

[00:32:23] HB: Not that long ago. Whereas, for example, the senatorial primary that saw David Pryor competing with Ray Thornton and Jim Guy Tucker got somewhere around 750,000 people participating. You know, extraordinary turnout. So the Democratic Party really did manifest its monopoly in terms of the primary participation here. I think you're gonna see that starting to change and evening up a little bit. I think a critical role there has to do with presidential primaries, which come to

Arkansas in the—I guess [19]76 was the first time they had one. That's not quite right. There was sort of one in [19]72 with Wilber Mills to give him some traction.

JD: Sure.

HB: It wasn't a big deal. But from [19]76, largely going forward, one of the ways the Republican Party did build its electoral support was through the venue, the institution, of a presidential preference primary here. And I would attract considerable—I would give considerable significance to that institution in terms of explaining the rise of Republican Party loyalties in the state because that allowed the popular Republican figures who had long been getting Arkansas's general election vote to start getting a primary vote as well. [00:34:07] But I think one of the real issues going forward for the Republican Party, skipping a way ahead, is how well are they going to be able to handle intraparty conflict manifested in primary competitions here? So far, it hadn't been an issue really for a dominant party in the state, but what history tells you is it's gonna be at some point.

JD: We certainly saw it with Democrats.

HB: Sure.

JD: There—eventually you look around and there's no one else to beat up on in the other party. [*Laughs*] And so I think we may

be seeing that now, like you said.

[00:34:45] HB: I think it is. I think we're seeing the early signals, so one of the things that I'm looking at is how the Republican Party manages the intraparty conflict as it takes place at the ballot box through the primary, so I think you're onto something, focusing on the primary as an institution.

[00:35:07] JD: And we know that it's changed since the 1990s with—even involved the courts overturning the process by which we conducted primaries in the state, so there's a lot of history there, and I value your historic view on that as well, with the beginning with 1976 being that maybe that first . . .

HB: Yeah.

JD: . . . real successful or significant primary event.

[00:35:33] HB: I think if you look at the Republic—I think you look at the presidential primary votes beginning in [19]76, you can see the story you're trying to tell taking place. It's one good indicator.

JD: I believe it's 2014 is the first time we see more voters in the Republican primary than the Democratic primary in the state.

HB: Which is obviously a milestone. And the expansion of it across the state, the moving out of—when Northwest Arkansas can no longer control—Northwest Arkansans can no longer control a

Republican nomination.

[00:36:13] JD: There's been some discussion about maybe the possible significance of the 2008 presidential primary and the way . . .

HB: The early one.

JD: . . . that we—it timed out . . .

HB: Yeah.

JD: . . . and what that may or may not have done to help Republicans.

HB: Yeah. Andrew Dowdle's got an argument there that he puts forward that . . .

JD: Yes. Yes. Yes.

[00:36:32] HB: The way I remember it, and again, memory fades, but you had a separate presidential primary in maybe February before the regular party primary in May. And what that did, in Andrew's telling, and I think he's onto something there, is because of the public record that a primary vote creates, it gives the Republican Party organization a list [*laughs*] of voters to target in terms of participation in the upcoming primary and in the general election that simply was invaluable. Because, remember, 2008 was a hotly contested race. People were interested in it. Huckabee was, you know, very much on the

scene as a favorite son. I think Andrew is on to something there.

[00:37:34] JD: It was interesting. So if we're looking back into just a few election cycles ago, if we were to point to a period where we see this just dramatic shift in partisanship, we're probably looking more at [20]12 and [20]14. In 2010 we see Republicans make gains, of course, we see the Tea Party movement, disapproval of President Obama's time in office, only a short term in office at that period, but we really see Republicans make their major gains in [20]12 and [20]14. If we were to look back on those cycles, was there one or two elections in [20]12 and [20]14 where you could now in hindsight look back and say, you know, those were or that one race was such a significant one that it helped illuminate what we would then later see, where we are today, with almost complete dominance with the Republican Party in Arkansas?

[00:38:31] HB: Well, certainly I think the losses by the Democratic incumbents, Lincoln and Pryor, and then the loss by Mike Ross in the gubernatorial race clearly show that the national pattern has become a state pattern. And I guess my line would be we see the end of Arkansas exceptionalism. Arkansans become far less distinctive in their political behavior than we had portrayed

ourselves as being over the many decades. And we vote just like people like us vote around the region and around the country. And there's no, again, exceptions that can be drawn. And again, I think the losses by Pryor, Lincoln, and Ross demonstrate that what was happening at the presidential level, the national-ticket level, is a pattern that's gonna permeate or filter down, has trickled down to the state levels, and you're gonna lose by the margins you lose presidential races.

[00:39:47] JD: One—the split ticket voting that you had mentioned that really came to rise in the [19]60s . . .

HB: Yeah.

JD: . . . [19]70s are at this point gone in Arkansas.

HB: Yeah, extraordinary correlations between the presidential level voting and the senatorial and gubernatorial voting.

[00:40:09] JD: Much has been written about Arkansas's long-held status as the last solid Democratic Southern state. And we can go back to V. O. Key, of course, in the 1940s, but we can look at Black and Black and the rise of the Republicans in the South—with sort of a snapshot that Arkansas is still sort of lagging behind its Southern neighbors and, as you've discussed, this idea of exceptionalism in Arkansas politics. All that has—appears gone to the storage bin of history in many ways, and we

see ourselves embarking on a period in Arkansas politics that is not only competitive—it's really not a two-party, competitive system. It went from a single-party-dominated Democratic state to a single-party-dominated Republican state in such short order that that may be the last exceptional thing that Arkansas can claim in its more recent political history. [00:41:09] All that has happened over the last, you know, forty years—particularly, then, all that has really come to fruition in just the last few—what are your closing thoughts on this significant period of time that we find ourselves in?

[00:41:25] HB: Well, I think, moving beyond the kind of personality centered discussion that we had a few minutes ago with the Big Three, I do think there's really some important socioeconomic and demographic factors that explain developments in Arkansas politics. They explain why we were late coming to the Republican game and why we are so clearly in the Republican camp at this point. We didn't have the suburbs when the suburbs were helping Republicans prosper elsewhere. We don't have the suburbs when the suburbs are now helping Democrats prosper elsewhere. We have consistently been a poor state, relatively speaking, and as the Republican party has gained traction within the white working class, obviously the Republican

Party of Arkansas is a tremendous beneficiary of that given that presence within the Arkansas electorate. Who Arkansans are used to be Democrats socioeconomically and demographically and now are Republicans. In that sense, maybe we haven't changed that much in terms of who we are, we've changed in the labels which we attach to who we are.

[00:43:00] JD: That's a really nice way to, I think, to wrap that up. I guess the other thing that you've touched on just there were demographics as well. And if we look at other Southern states, we do see some changing. We see Texas, perhaps, over time becoming more competitive, at least in statewide races, and of course, Georgia in the 2020 election becomes just narrowly in favor of the Democratic candidate for president, President Joe Biden, as well as the two rather unique elections in the US Senate in the same election cycle there. What—do you see Arkansas benefiting demographically among the Democratic ranks in the ways that we see other states, or do you think our demographics being whiter will lead to greater—at least a long-term Republican success?

[00:43:59] HB: Well, certainly it's gonna be a much rougher row to hoe for the Democrats here. I do think we ought to be watching what's happening in Northwest Arkansas, where the greatest

growth in the state is taking place and the greatest potential for change is occurring. And there are some very, very weak signals that the Democrats are finding, again, some support in Northwest Arkansas, which, of course, since the Civil War had been the haven for the Republican presence. So I think that'll be kind of the lead indicator there, the canary in the coal mine. If the Democrats can up their game in Northwest Arkansas, I think that bodes well in the long run because that's where the growth and, you know, development of the state's taking place.

[00:44:52] JD: What do you think Republicans need to do to . . .

HB: Oh.

JD: . . . if it's even possible to continue to grow but at least maintain? This is a party that has had some successes in the past . . .

HB: Yeah.

JD: . . . but usually, as you've said, sort of fall back. Obviously, this is a different situation than what we're accustomed to seeing in the state, and this is a different situation than Republicans are used to being in in the state of Arkansas, but what would they need to do, you think, to maintain their success?

[00:45:19] HB: Well, I'd offer first a caveat. I'm a whole lot better looking back than I am looking forward [*laughter*], and a lot

more comfortable with my hindsight as opposed to my foresight. But I think in the immediate short run, simply avoiding intraparty divisions and not getting caught up in civil wars. I think conflict is inherent in human interaction, and if it's not occurring between the parties, it's going to occur within the dominant party. And managing that conflict—I made some references earlier to the—whether—how divisive primaries might become for Republicans. But managing the tensions and trying to hold together what is ultimately a coalition here. And I think there's some strong national forces that are, you know, helping the Republicans at this point that do resonate well in Arkansas, but I do think if you're gonna have a majority in a state with 3 million inhabitants, you're going to have to manage some diversity there. [00:46:31] And whether it's regional, whether it's personalistic, whether it's ideological, whether it's issues, something'll come up that will prove divisive, and the question is how effective will the Republicans be in papering over those divisions? And what's helped them is being able to demonize Democrats. A weakened Democratic party is harder to demonize.

[00:47:03] JD: Any closing thoughts?

HB: Been a pleasure . . .

JD: Anything that we haven't mentioned?

HB: It's been a pleasure to visit with you.

JD: Well, on behalf of the Pryor Center, thank you so much for sitting down with us. Hal Bass, Dr. Hal Bass, Professor Emeritus at Ouachita Baptist University, a friend and mentor as well. Thank you so much for sitting down with me today.

HB: Thank you, John. It's a pleasure.

[End of interview 00:47:48]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]