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

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Blue to Red Oral History Project

Laura Kellams

Interviewed by John C. Davis

April 19, 2022

Fayetteville, 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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John C. Davis interviewed Laura Kellams on April 19, 2022, in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

[00:00:00]

John C. Davis: Here with me is Laura Kellams, former reporter for the *Morning News of Northwest Arkansas* and the *Democrat-Gazette* from 1994 to 2008. On behalf of the Pryor Center, we are thrilled to have you with us today to recount your time as a reporter looking at state politics, but also with a particular perspective from Northwest Arkansas, an area, the only area really, that historically has seen Republican success extending beyond the ten-to-twenty year period in which we see now unprecedented growth in the GOP in the state and its politics and the party's impact on our policy. So thank you so much for sitting down with me today for this project.

Laura Kellams: Well, you're welcome. Thanks for asking me to be part of it.

[00:00:49] JD: So the Pryor Center's interest is primarily to focus on the time period between the mid-2000s to roughly 2015, 2016, when we start to really see that measured growth in the GOP successes, both in the state capital but also in a lot of local races. So sort of predating that era, right, is the—is a period where the Democratic Party is still incredibly dominant in a state

that is more moderate to conservative and is really a stranger to its neighbors that have turned Republican about a decade or two prior to that. And so one thing that we've done is, over the course of this project, we've explored and reconsidered the scope a little bit. And we argue that there's really three generations of the Republican Party in the state. If we go back and look at it in hindsight, the first generation, I would argue, begins in 1966 with the election of Winthrop Rockefeller and ends in 1992, mainly because of the opportunities that a—the success of a Democrat in Arkansas, Bill Clinton, has in the impact that him ascending to the White House has on the GOP's opportunities in the 1990s. [00:02:03] And then the second generation would be 1993, roughly, to 2010, where we have a GOP that is having some successes in fits and starts. Of course, we have Governor Mike Huckabee for over ten years, and we have some gains in the state legislature, but then it's sort of an ebb and flow. There'd be an election cycle where Republicans do quite well. Maybe they win a house seat or an election, maybe an open-seat election somewhere either in Northwest or somewhere else in the state. But overall numbers in the general assembly are really not moving at this time period. And of course, we see 2010, the rise of the Tea Party. We see

opposition to President Obama and really a nationalization of politics that I think greatly helps the GOP and really hinders Arkansas's unique Democratic brand for that party. And then 2011 to today, where we see this historical, unprecedented growth of—from one-party dominance being Democratic Party dominance to Republican Party dominance in such a short amount of time. As we know, it's not unusual to have a state that has one party that does exceptionally well and one party that struggles. But the relatively quick nature and really the fast pace of the effective change is something that's very noteworthy. And so this is a study of Arkansas, of course, but is an interesting study for anybody who's looking at party politics in the US. So having said that, what is your earliest political memory in the state?

[00:03:44] LK: It's probably not that notable but I—so I moved to Arkansas when I was sixteen and moved to Carroll County. So my earliest political memory is probably—I remember a candidate coming out to our house. We lived six miles outside even the smallest—even a small town. So we were way, way out in the country along a creek side. And it took a long time to get there. And a candidate came. I think it was like a candidate for assessor or collector or something like that, and came all the

way to our house and all the way up the driveway to ask my parents for their vote and I—her vote. And I remember even as a sixteen-year-old who had just moved to Arkansas, I remember thinking, "Wow, this is a lot of effort [*laughs*] to come to talk to one person." And then, later when I look back on it, I saw that as sort of an example of kind of the hardcore retail politics of Arkansas that I had experienced, you know, when I very first moved here as a sixteen-year-old. But yeah, when I was a kid in Texarkana, I lived actually on the Texas side. I met Bill Clinton, but I didn't really consider that a political memory. [*Laughs*] He was the governor of the other state on the other side of the state line. [*Laughter*]

JD: But he knew on the off chance that you moved that he needed to know you, right?

LK: [*Laughs*] That's right. Everybody in Texarkana was fair game.

[00:05:05] JD: Well, and we'll get to the Big Three, as Diane Blair called them, later, with Clinton being . . .

LK: Sure.

JD: . . . one of them, and the retail politics . . .

LK: Sure.

JD: . . . that seemed to really rue the d—rule the day for century—well, for over a century in the state. [00:05:19] Going back to

that m—that time when you moved to Carroll County, do you—or maybe a little after when you were maybe a little more politically observant, do you recall your perception of the Democratic and Republican parties at that time in the state?

LK: I really don't. I was so new and my—we were a split political family. My mom voted Democrat, and my dad Republican. And we s—and my mom didn't like to talk about politics. [*Laughs*] And so we weren't entrenched in any politics, and I didn't—certainly not at the state level, since we were kinda new to the state. I learned more once I moved to Fayetteville and went to college. But at the time, I didn't really have a perception of the parties at the time.

JD: And this would've been in the 1990s?

[00:06:05] LK: I li—we moved here in [19]88, and I graduated from Green Forest High School in 1990, so it would've been the late [19]80s.

JD: And you're—so you're growing up in that interesting time in the state where it is largely, in most places, top-down Democratic dominated with exceptions, with key exceptions, maybe an occasional US house race, maybe—of course, Mike Huckabee being a really important exception to that for the GOP's growth later on. But you're also in an area in Northwest Arkansas that

historically had tilted more Republican. And certainly in pockets where you had John Paul Hammerschmidt that for decades had served in the US House, but was more times than not the sort of the outsider in terms of partisanship with the congressional delegation that the state sent to DC. So it's interesting perspective there. You were in probably a more bipartisan community in a bipartisan household with a state that otherwise was largely blue at that time to use our color—our references. When did you start observing politics in a way that led to your work in journalism?

[00:07:17] LK: It was actually hyperlocal because it was when I was at the university as a student reporter. So I was an overly serious reporter of student government [*laughs*] at the university. I look—I've heard since that I was a bit of an anomaly in terms of my taking student government extremely seriously. But at the time, it was—when I really got into reporting as a student, it was during the Clinton presidential run, so the summer of [19]92, the fall of [19]92, and some friends of mine and I actually had an upstart student newspaper [*laughs*] that we started. And we traveled to the presidential debate in 1992 and—the first presidential debate in St. Louis in 1992. And so we covered it as a, you know, little reporting team for our

brand new student newspaper. But so that was when I—probably my first political reporting assignment. We—I covered Clinton when he came to campus that—I think it was—was it the weekend before he was elected president when he was . . .

JD: It was in that late fall.

LK: . . . campaigning for Bumpers? Yeah. And it was very soon—I mean very—right before the presidential election. But so I covered that as a, quote, you know, "student reporter." [*Laughs*] But when—in 1993, [19]94 was when I started like a student in—an internship, journalism internship, at the *Morning News*. [00:08:54] And then [19]94 I started working full-time at the *Morning News*, the Springdale newspaper, the *Morning News of Northwest Arkansas*. And I would, even though I covered city politics, I would occasionally cover statewide candidates when they came through. And so my first real time covering an Arkansas candidate or political scene was Mike Huckabee came as a lieutenant governor candidate. And I think, looking back on the timeline, I think he must have been running for reelection or for his first full term in the mid-[19]90s. Yeah, he was campaigning at Western Sizzlin in Springdale. So that's when I first started observing politics as a—for my job. Mostly it started as local politics. [00:09:42] And then I went to work at

the *Democrat-Gazette* in 1997 and was still covering mostly local and regional issues. But then in 2002 I started full-time covering state politics in the legislature, always from my base in Northwest Arkansas, but covering the Northwest Arkansas delegation on a state—for the statewide paper. And at the time, believe it or not, newspapers were really growing, and there was a huge competition in Northwest Arkansas. And so there were—I had a direct competitor at the *Morning News*, and we both only covered state politics here in Northwest Arkansas. And so we—it was a really vibrant coverage because we competed against each other, and we were working really hard to cover state politics from a regional perspective. So that was my job from 2002 to 2008.

[00:10:37] JD: You know, and being in an area where, during that time period, you still—you have not only a few Republican wins, but Republican incumbents, right, in . . .

LK: Right.

JD: . . . in this portion—we're currently sitting in, of course, at the Pryor Center in Fayetteville, so we're referencing Northwest Arkansas here. So tell me a little bit about that if you—as you recall, you know, being a reporter from the perspective—your home base being Northwest Arkansas, a region that had long

held Republican loyalties in many pockets in a state that's awash with Democratic dominance. What do you think interesting perspectives that you maybe got to see that other reporters in other parts of the state may have missed?

LK: Well, in the mid-[19]90s—you know, I—it's often hard to realize that you're seeing history being made while it's happening, right, especially when you're a reporter. It's happening right in front of you on a daily basis. [*Laughs*] But I certainly saw the turning over of the legislative delegation and of county and local officials. But at the state level, it's definitely through term limits. I—we saw longtime Democratically held legislative seats in places like Springdale, in Benton County, seats that turned Democrat to Republican in the mid-[19]90s and never have gone back. And so we saw some of that happen. And then, of course, the—some of the statewide candidates, a lot of times the statewide Republican candidates, were from here. Or from—you know, if you think about Senator Hutchinson when he was a congressman and then was a senator, and then of course, Governor Hutchinson and John Paul Hammerschmidt, even though he was—about the time I became a full-time reporter was when he was retiring, he was still pretty large on the scene.

[00:12:38] JD: And so you had John Paul Hammerschmidt and then

John Boozman in that seat for some time, who's now, of course, US senator.

LK: And his brother Fay was a statewide candidate when I was a young reporter for senate. And I'm trying to think. Maybe even another one. But yeah.

[00:12:57] JD: So you were in that era, and you've mentioned a couple of key things here. You mentioned term limits. So how do you think term limits impacted the landscape in such a way that may have aided Republicans, particularly in this region?

LK: I think—I mean, it certainly ushered out lon—you know, these longtime Democratically held legislative positions. But—and but this was really the only part of the state where I think at that time they were being replaced by Republicans. So in Northwest Arkansas we saw those seats changing over. But throughout the state, we didn't. I think that while the voters of Arkansas might have agreed with Republicans on policy issues in those days, I think that they didn't yet self-identify that way. And so it took a long time for that to spread through the rest of the state. But at the time in Northwest Arkansas, the Republican Party that I was covering was very strong and controlled. I mean, if you think about Benton County in my time as a reporter, the Democratic Party was very, very weak and small [*laughs*] in Benton County.

And that was certainly not the case anywhere else in the rest of the state, I guess, at the time. But so I was witnessing that, not realizing probably how much of an anomaly it was.

[00:14:32] JD: And you mentioned earlier, you know, Mike Huckabee. So Mike Huckabee runs in a special election in 1993 and surprises a lot of people with a victory. And then of course, by 1996 he's become governor. Not the first in this sort of modern era to be a Republican governor, but we do know now he's the first to serve, you know, two term or—well, two four-year terms plus the extra time replacing Jim Guy Tucker in his role. So think back, if you would, to Governor Huckabee's ten plus years in office. As a reporter did you see the impact that he may have had on either his party or on Arkansas that may have, looking back, played a role in helping the GOP get to where it is today?

[00:15:28] LK: I think so. I mean he was certainly a charismatic figure, and I don't think that there was someone like that in the party at the time. I mean, we had—obviously Arkansas was famous for these charismatic Democratic leaders that we've talked about already. But I don't know that there was that kind of statewide, very charismatic figure like he was. And he ran—I mean, he campaigned and governed fairly moderately. I mean

certainly to the right of moderate, but—because he had to. Right, I mean, the—he had to to get anything through the legislature, which was overwhelmingly Democratic, and then in an overwhelmingly, at the time, Democratic state. But I—yeah, so I think that he had that sort of Arkansas brand, right, of just being able to talk to anybody about issues and—yeah, so I think that he grew some excitement in the Republican Party statewide, certainly regionally here. But I also think that some of his stances at the time might have—I don't know that the word hindered would be right. I'll say that again [*laughs*] if that's okay. I think he grew excitement in the party statewide, but I also think sometimes he took some political stances that proved to be unpopular later in the Republican Party, which I think some folks criticized him for later.

[00:17:06] JD: Maybe school consolidation or some of those where he really went out front.

LK: Yeah.

JD: And it took, I'm sure, some political courage because it was not a terribly popular decision, even if I think at the time we had not only more, but I think many more school districts than most states at the time.

LK: Yeah. And I . . .

JD: And still do.

LK: But I, yeah, I think abo—I covered school consolidation a lot, maybe more than any other *Democrat-Gazette* reporter at the time, but—I mean, we had education reporters. But in terms of the politics side of it, I ended up covering that so much because a lot of the fight happened in rural Ozarks because some of the most distant districts and huge—the districts that would be created would be huge in these very mountainous places. And so some of the hardcore opposition came from my part of the state that I sort of covered. And I thought back on that later, whether this Republican governor fighting, in many ways, Democratic legislators from rural Arkansas may have slowed down that Republican advance in during that time. I mean, the political scientists would know better than I, but I have thought about that a good bit over the years.

[00:18:22] JD: One thing that seems now apparent is we know that we don't really see Governor Huckabee having long coattails. Now, we see that he's a popular governor. We can look at the Arkansas poll, which is conducted at that time roughly every other year. Now it's an annual tradition. It's a wonderful resource. And we know that Arkansans typically like their governors once they're in office, and Huckabee would be one of

those. But we don't see his name being on the ballot, both in [19]98 and 2002 with essentially both times being an incumbent governor, which is a rarity and just for the way that he took office, really aiding Republicans in a notable way. So he's popular, but it doesn't seem to extend down the ballot. However, over ten years of service allowed him to make over 300 appointments to boards and commissions. And one thing that Governor Huckabee has mentioned was that he felt that was maybe the biggest contribution he had to his party, but it took a while, right. It planted seeds. It took a while to bear fruit in that we didn't see it immediately. It took ten years, really, before you saw the Republican Party have a bench that would've rivaled the Democrats in maybe the 1980s, early 1990s. So I think that's really interesting. And I think you mentioned the challenges of governing and governing in a way where I think Huckabee's years will be really a rarity in that he's of one party in a general assembly overwhelmingly of another. The challenges there may have stalled some of the momentum that Republicans may have otherwise enjoyed. I think that's a really great insight.

[00:20:10] LK: And he irritated [*laughs*], I mean, some Republicans, right, at the time with some of his stances and that—I mean, I

think about the Republicans that he called the Shiite Republicans, which I'm sure you've talked to folks about for this project. But so I would—was covering those Republicans who were chiefly from Northwest Arkansas. And so they were fairly far to the right on many issues. And so he would sometimes very openly campaign against them even in partisan races, right. So yeah, so I think that—and there was some of that that he was—there was still that pragmatic center in Arkansas that was governing together, right, and then he—so he saw—or at least it appeared. He said publicly that some of these guys, and they were mostly guys, on the right who were irritating him, and he was irritating them, if that makes sense.

[00:21:20] JD: Mm-hmm. And as you pointed out, most of them were in Northwest Arkansas because that's where the party was.

LK: Right.

JD: And that's where you would see Republicans in the General Assembly in particular. And of course, Huckabee having roots more in South Arkansas. So there's a regional division there as well. And as you said, someone who took—had to take a more pragmatic, moderate view of the state's politics. And I'm really curious to see what your thoughts are on this. As someone who, again, was covering state politics, but from a perch in Northwest

Arkansas, looking back, when did you start to see sort of the outgrowth, if you will, of partisanship and party leanings that Northwest Arkansas had exhibited for decades begin to spread? Do you recall now looking back when you started to see hints of that? We know it probably wasn't Huckabee because again, we've established his success was sort of his own and then leads to success later. Do you remember when you started to see this momentum shift?

[00:22:21] LK: I feel like it was—it was about the time I was leaving, I think. I mean, I covered politics till 2008, and there was certainly some, obviously, growth in the early 2000s and mid-2000s. But the real dramatic shift came after I was a reporter. But I did start to see a different brand, I think, starting to succeed when I—during my time, which was some of the Republican candidates who would have been the ones who opposed Huckabee on some of these issues. I think about immigration. He'd—the strong stance he took on undocumented immigrants being able to go to college and pay in-state tuition prices, which didn't pass during his tenure. Though the members who opposed him on that who, at the time, were—well, I mean all of—it didn't pass the legislature, the Democrats and the Republicans [*laughs*] opposed him on that. But some of

the ones who were the most vocal—I think about like a Senator Jim Holt, who I covered extensively, who was a state senator and ran for US Senate sometime during the mid-2000s. I should have the number in front of me, but I don't. But I think about some of those legislators who he and others were sort of branding as very far right, who their brand started to win in more primaries. And I think we still see that today, that it's a different party in Northwest Arkansas than it was, I think, when I was a reporter. There was much more of the kind of economic development side of the party, and there was a real working together of all the delegation in this part of the state. They were mostly Republican, but there were Democrats, and they all kind of worked together on some economic development issues and that kind of thing. And I don't know that that is as prominent as it was then, or it doesn't—as an observe—outside observer now, it doesn't appear to be that same—but anyway, so I think some of the brand is a little different than it was when I was a reporter.

[00:24:41] JD: So do you recall—during this time when you started to see the sort of Northwest Arkansas brand of Republicanism taking hold in larger pockets of the state, there seems to be this, in hindsight, feeling that people assume that it would sort of

pass, that Republican success that really hadn't been seen before would ebb and flow. We'd seen that with Republicans. And we know now that it didn't. It just continued to gain momentum and really take over the state's politics. But do you recall the reaction from others in media and maybe those individuals, maybe party elites and political elites who you would've interacted with regularly, what their reaction was at the time? So maybe, you know, mid-2000s to early 2010s in hindsight?

[00:25:34] LK: I feel like—I mean, some of that I missed as a reporter, but the early end of that, I was still a reporter. And I mean, in just from observing the South in general, I felt like people were just expecting it to come and that—and expecting that wave to continue and that we would follow the rest of the South to becoming a solidly red state. But I think what maybe surprised some, at least it seemed, is the way that the—what I was just talking about, sort of that Northwest Arkansas—not just Northwest Arkansas, but the further to the right in those primaries in Northwest Arkansas started to become more of the statewide outlook, I guess is one way to say it. I think of somebody like Senator Holt, who I worked with for a long time as a reporter. And he would sometimes be the—be criticized,

you know, obviously even by Governor Huckabee and by others in the party for some of the stances that he took. And I think later that became the sort of the popular stance. And so I think that was a little bit surprising. Maybe not that it—maybe not that the state was shifting as people might have expected a Southern state to do, but the folks who were winning in the primaries were more the Holt style, I think, than sometimes the Huckabee style, or at least the [19]90s, 2000s Huckabee style.

[00:27:11] JD: There's a feeling, I think, among a lot of political observers in the state that the Democratic brand in Arkansas was distinct from the national brand of Democratic Party politics and had been really since the mid-[19]60s. At the same time, the Republican brand was not yet really being adopted by Arkansans, but the Arkansans were probably, at least a plurality, were more aligned with the national Republican brand.

LK: Sure.

JD: And so this brand alignment had to occur eventually for all the pieces to fall in place. But we see now, I think, what you're touching on, which is a Republican Party politics that is well matched from the national brand. What you would expect the Republicans to take positions on in DC is really the same you would expect at the state and even local levels in Arkansas.

Whereas Democrats for a long time finessed that. They had the Big Three as Diane Blair has said with Bumpers, Pryor, and Clinton, who were able to have personal politics that transcended partisanship in many ways. And so voters had these personal ties to Democratic candidates. But even when they were voting for Republican presidential candidates, they still knew Bill and David and Dale, and they knew them personally. They felt like they did. And perhaps even Mike Beebe, who I think had that same sort of . . .

LK: Sure.

JD: . . . relationship with a lot of Arkansans where Arkansans felt they knew him, and they trusted him, and there was something there beyond this partisan wall that was being built in a more polarized politics in Arkansas, but also in the US as a whole. [00:28:53] You're a reporter at sort of the very beginning of that, perhaps, looking back. Do you remember, were there any changes in the way that you covered politics as a reporter in those years in the [19]90s and in 2000s? Anything about the political climate changing and how you had to conduct the job? You had mentioned working with, of course, you know, a lot of these sort of early upstart Republicans in Northwest Arkansas. Did anything change in how you covered politics when some of

the partisan winds were shifting a bit?

[00:29:24] LK: I don't think so, really. I—my time was—I mean, a lot of the stories that would be about Republicans I wrote because of where I was and where they lived and the area that I was supposed to cover. And so—yeah, I don't think—there may have been some of that with reporters at the state level who might have been based in Little Rock. But since I was always kinda covering the Republican races, and certainly I ended up covering a bit—good bit of the primaries when they would happen because of where I was. And so much of the campaigning happened up here. The, you know, when the—when folks like Lieutenant Governor Rockefeller, you know, were running, so many of the events that they attended and the speeches that they made would end up being in Benton County because that's where the crowds were, and they couldn't win statewide without winning in Benton County. And so I ended up covering a lot of that. So I guess I probably didn't have to shift much of it just because it was sort of the focus already.

[00:30:31] JD: Sure. So you know, as someone who's been in Arkansas since your teens, and even when—even before then you were around Arkansas on the wrong side of Texarkana, as we might call it, [*LK laughs*] you know, you have a lot of

personal experience, and you have professional experience in covering a lot of elected officials, of course, as a reporter in the [19]90s and early 2000s. So in your experience and in your educated opinion—when we look at Arkansas, we typically see that it's the last sort of solid Democratic Southern state. What do you think were some of the reasons? Chances are, you saw some of it before a lot of others just because of your location and your job at the time. What do you think were some of the reasons for this shift that we see? It's later, it's sort of after you've left journalism, but it's fast and ferocious, and you probably saw kernels of it before many of us. So what do you think some of the reasons that led to this?

LK: To it being dramatic?

JD: Dramatic . . .

LK: The shift . . .

JD: So heavily not only Republican, but it went from one-party . . .

LK: So heavily.

JD: . . . Democratic rule, for the most part, to one-party . . .

LK: Right.

JD: . . . Republican rule?

[00:31:47] LK: Right. I think that there were—we tou—have touched a little bit on some of it. And I think about things like

school consolidation maybe keeping—just a hypothesis, you know—maybe keeping some of those rural areas more Democratic than they might have become in the few years before. That wasn't too long before the big shift came. But that might have—[*clears throat*] excuse me—contributed to the dramatic aspect of it. But I mean, I think that—I'll leave it to the political scientists probably, but certainly President Obama's election and run obviously is the most cited as being one of the reasons for that dramatic shift. And I certainly saw that. I was still a reporter in 2008, at least through the summer. So I saw and interviewed people some about his campaign, and I certainly saw some of that. I remember interviewing people, on the phone anyway because I was here, but in south and east Arkansas who would fairly openly talk about the reasons that they were not gonna vote Democratic when they had before. So I think that we saw some of that. It was not identifying with him and not just—I mean, I think everyone would agree that there was a racial factor, but I think that in—also on policy and that. And we really saw the biggest shifts, I think, after he was already president and the policy initiatives, including like the Affordable Care Act—I think the rise of the Tea Party in opposition to that was really matched closely with probably

where Arkansans already were on policy. And so it gave them the brand that they might have not known they were looking for [*laughs*], if that makes sense.

[00:33:33] JD: Sure. Well, if we think about it, right, we can go all the way back. It's 1960. So you have 2008 to 1960 where you don't have a Southern Democratic presidential candidate successfully, right, win the White House. And so I'm sure—and we've documented this as well in this project. Race certainly probably played a role in some pockets and in some ways where maybe even people didn't realize, but there was just so many differences. And President Obama may have been sort of the embodiment, right, of this Democratic Party that the state had sort of successfully walled itself off from for so long. And the dam, so to speak, broke, right, in 2008. So you leave journalism in such an interesting time. In 2008 it could be argued that Arkansas Democrats had one of the more successful election cycles they've ever had.

LK: Yeah.

[00:34:32] JD: They picked up seats in the general assembly. Mark Pryor wins reelection and doesn't even have a Republican opponent.

LK: Right. They had all seven constitutional offices.

JD: All seven constitutional offices, all six—well, with exception of Northwest Arkansas they had—so they had five of the six Congressional seats if we include the Senate and the House. It was a wildly successful time for Democrats. What we know now is shortly thereafter, right, we see that—it's things that maybe you picked up on previously, national politics changing leading to this significant seismic shift in the State's politics. Arkansas for so long seemed to hold onto its more parochial political traditions and emphasis on retail politics that you've touched on already longer than some other states. We seem to sort of beat back some of the technological advancements and things. Maybe it was our media market was a little confused with Memphis and other areas, but not necessarily outside of Little Rock. What do you think happens to that politics in a more nationalized political environment?

[00:35:40] LK: I think that's really what has completely changed politics in Arkansas is that nationalization. We—I mean, it's fairly obvious, but I think ev—anybody who would've covered the legislature at the time that I did would've seen it as a fairly non—not nonpartisan. I mean, there's no such thing as that when you're being elected as Republicans and Democrats. But certainly, they were governing as a body in a fairly nonpartisan

way. I saw that happen, not just with the Northwest Arkansas delegation, but statewide. I mean, we saw—I mean, it's been said a million times, but like the urban—it was an urban versus rural legislature as opposed to a partisan one. And then, when we saw this nationalization, I just don't—I mean, it's not—it—to me it's night and day in terms of how the governing happens and how the campaigning happens. So different from what it was when I was covering it. And I feel like that happened after, you know, post-2010, rise of the Tea Party, the opposition to Obamacare. I mean, I feel like that really began to change the way everything happened in campaigning in Arkansas. I mean, and then, of course, the rise of almost unlimited campaign funds coming into the state, the dialing back of campaign finance rules. And so that really changed so much for us. [00:37:10] But yeah, I think about—so I probably did one of the last long interviews anyway with Congressman Hammerschmidt in the—it may have been 2007, 2008 time period. But and he—at the time he was lamenting the just hyperpartisanship in Congress. And he was talking about how when he would go visit and he was allowed to go on the floor as a former member and he would hug these Democrats, and the young Republicans, members, would ask him why he was doing that. You know, that was the

enemy. And he would lament that he hated that it was that way. And I re—and we talked about the fact that, you know, in Arkansas it wasn't like that. And certainly, the legislature in Arkansas wasn't like that, but it feels like it is now. At least as an outside observer, it feels like it is now. So I think that that—yeah, the nationalization of our politics has really changed that and made it more difficult to build a pragmatic middle to do some things.

[00:38:20] JD: We've seen demographic change impacting Republican strongholds in many Southern states. So we're speaking in 2022. We know in 2020 we saw a slightly more competitive Texas and a much more competitive Georgia. And there's—of course, here we are in Northwest Arkansas where there's a real boom that has been continued now for decades of population growth, and a lot of that population growth has come from outside of the state where most Northwest Arkansas residents today are probably from somewhere else. Do you see a time in the state, and then we all put our future thinking caps on, where we become that competitive sort of purple state, largely driven by the growth of Northwest Arkansas?

[00:39:11] LK: I think it could happen, but I think that it would—it's a long shot anytime in the near future. So I think that—I often

joke with people that we were the last to go solid red, and we might be the last to not be solid red. So if we were twenty years behind what Alabama and Georgia, then maybe we'll be [*laughs*] twenty years behind them again. But Northwest Arkansas is definitely the X factor in that, right. And so if we have a million people like might be predicted—is predicted that might happen by 2045 or the early 2040s that we—not only the people who are moving here from other places who aren't used to Arkansas politics or the demographic changes in that population could definitely, certainly change Northwest Arkansas. Whether that could change outcomes statewide will be really interesting to see. I think it would take a large population shift and a lot of change quickly, but certainly, we've seen a lot of change quickly in Arkansas over the last decade or so.

[00:40:21] JD: I have a question. For someone who was a very dedicated reporter even in high school and college, keeping the ASG in line, [*LK laughs*] pulling back the curtain of student government, if you will—much is written today about the state of journalism and in particular the state of journalism in state politics and government. And I wonder, as a former journalist, if you would speak on your views on the role of journalism, particularly at the state level as a part of small-d democratic

politics and democracy in the United States.

[00:41:02] LK: I worry about it almost constantly, just having been in that position and understanding what it took to be—work as hard as I could to do objective reporting in politics in Arkansas. I hate that there are fewer people doing that. And I hate that it's so hard for traditional journalism to bring in revenue that it takes to employ people to do that work. I hate that the reporters I worked with years ago haven't gotten a raise in ten years, so they're making less now than they were then. So people are being driven out of the industry. Yeah, I worry very much about that we have fewer reporters in Arkansas and certainly fewer in Northwest Arkansas. We used to have a very competitive market here, and now there's just not as much coverage. [00:41:57] I'm—there—the—I think that the—our statewide newspaper, and not just because I used to work there, but just as a newspaper reader in general, I think it's excellent and maintains a level of excellence that is very difficult to do in a market our size. And the people who are working there are doing excellent journalism, but there are just fewer of them. And it's, I mean, very obvious, but it's just how you hold elected officials accountable. And when people campaigning for office don't have to answer as many questions, there aren't as many

folks covering press conferences, it's just—fewer perspectives are—I would cover something, and my competitor would cover something, and we would mostly probably have the same idea. But we would have different stories, and we would interview different people and have different, you know, secondary sources and that kind of thing. And the fewer reporters there are, the fewer perspectives that are being brought in. And I would hope that the people even running for office and elected officials would lament the loss of that too because they—their—sometimes their messages aren't getting out as much as they would have otherwise.

JD: One problem that we've seen historically in Arkansas, and this is . . .

LK: [*Paper rustling*] Sorry, I'll just put these away.

JD: I've been worried I would do it. So I'm glad you did it. One of us is going to do that. [00:43:23] Speaking of the importance of journalism in a state, political scientists and historians often are concerned about one-party rule regardless of the party. We have decades of history where the Democratic Party in Arkansas ran the state rather poorly. And I think that can be shown objectively. And Diane Blair certainly chronicled this in her late [19]90s publication of Arkansas politics, and Jay Barth followed

up with her in 2005. And the question was, can one-party rule, can one-party dominance, really be an effective vehicle or means for public good? And we're facing that again, just with a different party in power. And it seems that journalists, one thing that they are able to contribute to is even when there's not a two-party system of party competition, of idea competition, journalists are the last sort of wedge in there to be able to pry and ask those important questions that the out party may not really have the power to do or even an interest in doing because they're just struggling so as a minority party. So I do think there's potential there, right, for one-party dominance to not suffer some of the stigmas that it did in the early twentieth century, particularly among the Democrats in the state. But the work of journalism is certainly very, very important in that regard.

[00:44:55] LK: And we still—I—we still see it, I think in the—even in one-party rule, you know, in those primary races. I think about one recent—a story recently where a candidate was saying, you know, jobs are really important in his district, economic development is really important in his district. And his competitor said, "Well, he obviously doesn't wanna talk about the issues that are important to voters." [*Laughs*] And that was

nationalized issues, not local economic development issues. And so yeah, we sti—and that's reporting that's still happening, but yeah, we still need it so much so we can see the difference in those candidates even in a one-party state.

[00:45:35] JD: Do you have any closing thoughts on, you know, what you witnessed as a reporter, what we have witnessed more recently as Arkansans, just about the partisan shift that we've seen?

LK: I don't think—I think we've covered most of, you know, what I can—I have a terrible memory. [*Laughs*] So the pa—I had to remind myself of some of the things I even covered, but I think we've covered most of—mostly what I was thinking about, you know, su—as a daily reporter, which I loved being. I always loved working on the daily, every single day stories as opposed to like the longer-term projects that some people love. But watching things like this happen daily and observing them happen daily, you just don't see the historical arc that you're witnessing happening right in front of you. So it's good to talk about it and to think back on it. But yeah, having witnessed it every day, you didn't really realize you were witnessing history, so I'm glad to be able to visit about it.

JD: Well, Laura Kellams, former reporter covering both state and

local politics, on behalf of the Pryor Center, thank you so much for sitting down with us today and sharing your insights, particularly as a journalist in the 1990s and early 2000s based out of Northwest Arkansas, but with a unique perspective for statewide politics.

LK: Thank you. Thanks for inviting me. I appreciate it.

[End of interview 00:47:00]