

You Might Be Right - Political Parties - Transcript

Marianne Wanamaker: Welcome to "You Might Be Right," a place for civil conversations about tough topics, brought to you by the Baker School of Public Policy and Public Affairs at the University of Tennessee with funding support from members of our producer circle. To learn more about how you can support our work, visit youmightberight.org.

As a kickoff to season four, we invited the governors to reflect on our country's two-party system and their own party affiliations. I'm Marianne Wanamaker, dean of the Baker School, and it is my pleasure to serve as the moderator for their discussion.

Two political parties dominate the American political landscape. But as we approach the 2024 presidential election, a growing number of Americans are dissatisfied with both parties and the values for which the parties stand seem to be evolving. In this episode, our hosts, former Tennessee Governors Bill Haslam and Phil Bredesen, reveal why they chose to be part of their respective political parties and how they are squaring their own values with America's evolving political landscape.

Bill Haslam: So, Phil, I found some notes that I made five years ago when I was first thinking about what would it be like to have a podcast where we presented two sides of a difficult argument. I had some proposed topics down there. The very first is, tell me why you're a Republican, or tell me why you're a Democrat. So maybe instead of bringing in guests, what if the two of us take a swing at this?

Phil Bredesen: Why are you Republican, anyway?

Bill Haslam: Well, like I said, I'm on the side of truth and beauty and goodness. We'll bring Marianne in here to help us through this discussion.

Phil Bredesen: I think actually it's a great idea. It's almost like what religion you were born into, that people don't think about all that much, and I think it's a great topic.

Marianne Wanamaker: Well, you know what question comes first then. So Governor Bredesen, tell our listeners...

Bill Haslam: I like it... start with our elders.

Marianne Wanamaker: Let's just start there. Just start there. Why are you a Democrat?

Phil Bredesen: I had a chance before I ran for office the first time here to really decide where I wanted to come down. I grew up in a very Republican household. Upstate New York, everybody's a Republican no matter what you do or where you're from. Then I went to college in the '60s and everybody was a Democrat and sort of had a choice there.

Bill Haslam: You went to Harvard and turned left.

Phil Bredeesen: No, I definitely turned right into Harvard.

Marianne Wanamaker: That's not what this podcast is about, Bill Haslam.

Phil Bredeesen: For me, I guess it really comes back to the fact I grew up with my grandmother who was sixth-grade education and a seamstress, and I just always thought the Democrats had more to say to her and more to offer to her than I thought Republicans did, even though she was a Republican.

Marianne Wanamaker: All right, Governor Haslam, why are you a Republican?

Bill Haslam: Well, partly— initially my father was very involved in Republican politics, so that was kind of my introduction to politics. He was helping Howard Baker and Lamar Alexander and all these people run for office. So that was kind of my intro to politics.

But eventually, as Phil said, you go to college, you make up your own mind what you believe. And I just always thought the things that Republicans historically have cared about, it matters that we balance the budget. We're not doing so great on that now. But historically, we've cared about that. We believe in the battle between who should control the economy, the market or government, that I always wanted to— it's got to be, you got to have some government involvement. But I'm going to lean toward the market side. I've always thought that the United States should play a strong role on the world stage and you can argue that's a kind of a tenet or used to be of both parties. The idea that there are historical values of our country that have been important to make us who we are today, and again, those values can change over time, but that there's part of the story for how we became who we are that I think is worth remembering.

Marianne Wanamaker: Governor Bredeesen, so Governor Haslam listed a set of values, balanced budget, markets, US standing in the world stage. Can you articulate a set of values that Democrats hold that drew you there?

Phil Bredeesen: Yeah, I think in general a big axis is we live in an ever more complex world. It's been changing for the last two, three centuries. Some kind of collective action is needed. You don't build roads individually anymore and so on. And where you sit on that spectrum as to how involved the community and through government and so on ought to be in the processes of life, I think it's one of the things that really separates the parties. I think Democrats have a very strong belief in social insurance and probably would like it to cover even more things than it does today. A lot of Republicans feel differently.

The Democratic Party for me of the 1930s, the FDR as a kind of muscular, strong party that cared about the world stage, was very focused on the needs and the culture of working-class America. I think it was a really strong party and obviously had a strong, strong feeling. I'd love it

if we could start returning a little more to those kinds of roots.

Marianne Wanamaker: So can you then share with our listeners, how do you think the Democratic Party has evolved since you said you came to Nashville, you were able to sort of re-choose your party, you did that. Are the values that the party stood for when you made that decision the same values that the party stands for now?

Phil Bredeesen: No, I think the party has evolved. And I think it probably was in the '60s, between with civil rights and the Vietnam War and all those things, that the Democratic Party was always this kind of alliance between what I call sort of liberal intellectuals and these working-class people. And I think what happened is the liberal intellectuals won in the '60s and the party got much more focused on the issues they cared about and much less focused on what people cared about, who belonged to unions or didn't belong to unions and were working. And it seems very different today. It was a party of less economically successful people when I started. Today is a party of more economically successful people. It's just changed very much.

Marianne Wanamaker: Governor Haslam, same question to you. You described a set of things that the Republican Party once stood for. Does the Republican Party still stand for those things?

Bill Haslam: Unfortunately, in my opinion, not nearly as much as we should. You've seen budget deficits increase under Republican administrations as much as it has under Democrats. The party has definitely become more populist. It's become more, this is interesting given what Phil said, more working class oriented than historically. Historically, the image was Republicans were the country club big business types, and that would be far less true today. If you look at who votes Republican, a lot of working-class voters, more non-college educated voters is a percentage of the makeup of the Republican Party than would've been true 20 or 30 years ago. And then more, if you look at America's role on the world stage of us being, like I said, playing a leading role around the world today in terms of support for Ukraine, there's more Democrat support than Republican support for continuing for the United States to provide financial aid to Ukraine for the war with Russia.

Phil Bredeesen: When I was governor, I remember very well an occasion that really I think drove it home to me for the first time how much it had changed. And it was in a presidential election year, I believe it was in 2004, and I was out campaigning in some small town for the local state representative. We were walking down the street and knocking on doors and stuff. And I went down this street and it was full of these homes on kind of small lots and they were rectangular homes and they had a concrete front porch, front steps and bicycles and carts in the yard and maybe a carport over at the side. And it looked just like, it was a Democratic neighborhood, it was just all those people I was used to and every one of them had a Bush-Cheney sign in the front yard. And it was the first time it really hit home to me how much both my party and who was attracted had changed.

Bill Haslam: Many of the same type of experiences. It's interesting. When I was running for governor the first time I was in West Tennessee. West Tennessee historically, particularly rural

West Tennessee, was very Democratic. The Memphis and the urban cities still are, but the rural part of Tennessee is totally gone Republican. It'd be almost impossible for a Democrat to win a legislative district. And I'm talking to a man in West Tennessee and he said, "Your daddy was a Republican, wasn't he?" And I said, "Yes sir, he was." He goes, "Mine wasn't." He said, "I have the zeal of a convert because I chose and came here. You have the religion of somebody who's inherited it," with the implication being that you don't bring as much passion to the argument as I do, and that's what my problem was in his mind.

Marianne Wanamaker: It's funny you say that because I was just thinking a place like West Tennessee doesn't go from voting Democrat to voting Republican without a whole lot of people changing parties. Talk about that. People you know have changed parties, your own thoughts. Have you considered changing parties? Have you considered, "Well, this may not be my party anymore, I need to kind of dis-affiliate?" Talk about that a little bit.

Phil Bredezen: Well, it's never occurred to me to change parties. People who do that to stay in office are somewhere down on the lower rungs of the ladder of the way I feel about things. But what I always felt was important was that there was room for difference of opinion. I don't regard the Democratic Party as a religion, it's a bunch of people with different views banded together and if you decide to join one or the other of them. But there ought to be a lot of tolerance for things.

And I would get very frustrated at the time I was governor because I would say something and I'm certainly more conservative than the mainstream of my party. I would say something, I'd get these people just trashing me because I held a slightly different opinion. And my response was, "Gosh, I mean I'm a democratic governor of a state. I've won democratic primaries against real opponents to get here. I've got as much to say about what the Democratic Party is anybody else does. And let's not take this view of whatever the president says is now the catechism for the party and we need to just all march and step. That's not even remotely what the founders of this country thought about."

Bill Haslam: It's funny. No, I've never thought about switching parties. But it's interesting, I was at a Thanksgiving gathering, large group of people, and the conversation evolved into politics as things tend to do over time. And this one person who was forty-ish said, "Well, you're just a RINO. That's all. That's all you are." And I said, "So well tell me, what's a Republican believe?"

Marianne Wanamaker: A Republican in name only, a RINO.

Bill Haslam: Sorry, thank you for the definition. You're a Republican in name only, you're a RINO. And I said, "Really? That's so interesting. So in your mind, what does a Republican believe?" And they kind of stammered around a little bit and couldn't, didn't really answer the question. But the point is parties do evolve and change and the makeup of those people change as well. And in my book, I'm kind of a big tent Republican and I bet Phil is too on the Democrat side.

When you start drawing really narrow lines and say, "Well, you're in, you're out," I think that's bad for the party.

Phil Bredesen: I once heard somebody ask and I thought, capture what you were just saying, Bill, was that would you rather belong to a church that has a big tent and is opening people into worship or one that was busy sort of rooting out all the people who didn't believe literally down the line. I know the answer for me.

One thing I don't understand though is how did you ever let a Thanksgiving dinner devolve into politics? That seems like not something you'd do.

Marianne Wanamaker: Listen, mine did this year and I'll always regret it. But anyway.

Bill Haslam: I guess we'd finished talking about football by that point.

Marianne Wanamaker: Yeah, I guess. Both of you had the experience of being elected mayors in processes that are mostly nonpartisan or fully nonpartisan, and then being elected as your party's nominee for the governorship. So you went from a nonpartisan election platform to a partisan election platform. And I just wonder as you took office as governor, did you feel like that the population of the state had elected you or had they elected your party? How did you think about the distinction between those two things?

Bill Haslam: I'll be honest with you. You hope they're electing you, but there's definitely swings, there's tidal swings in how people vote. When I ran in 2010, Phil had been elected in 2006, won every county as I'm right, so he won by a large margin. When I was elected in 2010, that's President Obama's first midterm, historically a difficult time for the party in the White House. And it would've been hard for a Democrat to win in Tennessee in 2010, and that's how fast things had shifted a little bit. Phil was running for re-election in 2006, so I think the shift had already started, but it had definitely changed. And so winning the primary was 95% of the challenge of winning the election by then.

Phil Bredesen: I think in my case, certainly the election in 2002 was hotly contested. It was not decided in the primaries at all. I felt it was kind of a combination of it. There were some things that I brought to it that helped me get in. TennCare was a mess and you can't have a better resume than I had about trying to fix something like TennCare, which just my business history and stuff. But there's also a lot of people who are just comfortable with the Democrats. I think it's a combination of the two. But I think it's getting even more and more, it's tilting toward the party now rather than the individuals. There's no question about that.

Marianne Wanamaker: Did you feel like your party affiliation constrained you as governor, changed the way you made decisions?

Phil Bredesen: No, I was governor in a state that had already started. When I got in, it started its Republican shift. Remember I ran in 2002. In 2000, Al Gore lost the state and the presidency

right here. So I was always very aware that it was a very competitive state in a lot of ways and really actively looked for things to do where you could get some agreement, as opposed to pounding on the Democratic official platform and push things. The stuff we did with TennCare, it was a combination of some conservative and some liberal kind of approaches to the thing. I had to be very careful about that.

Bill Haslam: It is interesting going from a nonpartisan elected position as mayor to a partisan elected position as governor. And the change, it took me a while to fully grasp how different it was. I strongly believe local elections should be nonpartisan. I'll argue that one till the day I die that that's the right approach. I fully understand and agree with having state and national elections be partisan. But I wasn't quite prepared that everything was seen through that viewpoint, that everything was through that lens of, well, the Democrats are for this, so we've got to be against that or whatever it is. And it's an adjustment, and not necessarily a good one, to always see things through that lens instead of, well, what's the right answer. And as a Republican, here's going to be my natural approach to it, but ultimately, what's the right answer? And that took some adjustment.

Phil Bredesen: One of the things that I found was very different, I should have recognized, was that when you're mayor, we had a 40-person council and there were people who were very liberal and very conservative across the spectrum there. But what I found was you had the freedom to put together a coalition of people for any individual subject that wasn't always the same. The coalition to bring a football team here was totally different from the coalition to build schools, whereas once you get in into a partisan mode like the governor's office and the legislature is, it's a very different dynamic. You need to have your party with you and then find a few other kinds of people to get something done. But you lose the ability to put together these very flexible and fluid coalitions.

Bill Haslam: I remember somewhere in my first term, my first or second year, Lois DeBerry who represented Memphis in the State House and she passed some mark, I can't remember what it was, maybe the longest serving House member. I might not have the exact right, but something like that. That felt very important. And so I suggested to our folks that why don't I go down to the House chamber and recognize her and honor her? She served well and in this they looked at me like I'd proposed trying to run across the ocean to Hawaii or something. It's just like, "Well, you can't do that." It struck me as, "Here's a woman who has served well, don't agree with everything she's done, but she served well for a long time and we should honor her."

Marianne Wanamaker: Did you do it?

Bill Haslam: It ended up being that they ended up adjourning, somehow they ended up adjourning that day and we didn't get a chance to. But I remember being shocked that everybody thought that I was the only person that thought that was a good idea.

Phil Bredesen: If I'm not mistaken, though, I spoke at her funeral and I believe you were the other speaker.

Bill Haslam: That's right, the two of us spoke. You have a good memory. That's right.

Marianne Wanamaker: I was just thinking about Howard Baker's funeral and Joe Biden was one of the speakers at that funeral, right, and that feels like a bygone era at this point.

Bill Haslam: That's right.

Marianne Wanamaker: One of the things we wanted to talk about in this podcast was the growing dissatisfaction among Americans in general about the parties that are available to them and their dissatisfaction with what they stand for. And then what I see among our young people, especially among college undergrads, is that they are choosing not to affiliate with either party. So what advice would you give a young person who looks at these two parties and says, "I don't see myself in either one of these, I'm just going to go it alone"?

Bill Haslam: I would say this, I think it's, listen, if you want to work out over time, here's the party I agree with more than the other. I think that's fine. Here's what I would urge them not to do, though, is don't abandon being part of a primary process. And so I'd tell him, you need to choose that I'm going to be part of this primary or that primary because, particularly in Tennessee today, in 95% of our House districts and 90% of our Senate districts, the election's decided in the primary. And so if you say, "I'm just not going to play until the general election," and the same thing by the way with governors races, et cetera, well, the cake is mostly baked if you're not going to play in the primary.

Phil Bredezen: When I think about young people who are considering this and trying to work their way through, I guess the maze of doing this, I sort of divide them into two groups. I think there are those who want to talk about it and make a point and generate attention in that way, and there are people who really want to get something done. The ones who really want to get something done, I think can't abandon the party process.

I came of age back in the 1960s when I got out of college and doing that, and there's this very vigorous Democratic kind of liberal coalition in the country that had driven the president out of office over the war and so on. And I always thought that that generation, which I'm part of, failed in that it never sort of took that and then did the things and made the compromises that it took to actually make something happen. It was just all about posturing and positioning. People are welcome to do that, but that's not what I admire. I admire people who get in the kitchen and cook and figure out how to make things work. You got to be in a party to do that.

Bill Haslam: Phil is 100% right. I remember one of the times they were thinking about shutting down the government over the Congress talking about that, and I remember Lamar Alexander said, "I'm part of the group that wants to make it work, not shut it down." And Phil's point I think is a really good one. You can decide do you want to be about making a point or making a difference. And I'm like that, I've always rather been on the side of people that want to make a difference.

Marianne Wanamaker: The two-party system, though, feels like it in some ways, it supports those who just want to be in opposition to something, right? Because you can be a Republican because you're opposed to what the Democratic Party stands for and vice versa. So to that point, would we be better off in a system that had more options to let you less likely to define yourself by what you're against and more likely to define yourself by what you're for?

Phil Bredezen: I've never had a feeling that a multiplicity of parties, a third party or three and four parties were useful in American democracy, at least as it exists here in the 20th, 21st century. First of all, you start looking at the possibility of having elections for presidents and other things that are not decided and you end up with a mess as we have once already, in part, due a third-party candidate. Somebody would've to give me an awfully good reason as to why there needed to be that third party and that it was really a viable approach to it to abandon what it is we have. I'd much rather make what we have work better than try to go outside of it.

Bill Haslam: Listen, I think you're right. In the end, I'd say the system has served us remarkably well comparatively. But I will note that both Washington and Adams said if this deteriorates into just one party against the other, it won't end well for the country. And I'm obviously paraphrasing, but they both made pretty strong comments, Washington, Adams did to exactly that effect. I will say this, and like I said, I'm not ready to advocate for it, but there is something appealing to me about the parliamentary system of where there's several different parties and to win like, okay, I've got the largest share, but to get a majority, to get more than 50, I'm going to have to make an alliance with some other folks. And so it forces you to listen and work with other people rather than just to say, "I'm sorry, elections have consequences. We won 51-49, here's what's going to happen," and you take this evenly divided country and steer it off in one direction or the other

Marianne Wanamaker: Encourages coalition building. Just sometimes takes 216 days.

Bill Haslam: That's the downside. That's the downside.

Marianne Wanamaker: Yeah, agreed.

Bill Haslam: That's where a political science professor can help us.

Marianne Wanamaker: What do each of you wish that your party or the other party would do differently?

Phil Bredezen: I guess I wish my party would come back a little bit to being more respectful of and supportive of sort of all the various cultures that exist in the country. We're a party that loves to talk about tolerance and diversity and yet really are pretty intolerant of some of the diversity that already exists in the United States among Americans, returning more to an FDR notion of the party as being this sort of vigorous, strong party that really was addressing the fundamental issues which are economic but also cultural, that average Americans have. I think the party's

gotten off into the stratosphere on issues and are focusing on things I don't necessarily think they're wrong about, but just it's not where most of the people in this country, where their concerns lie.

Bill Haslam: The first thing that comes to mind is Republicans have kind of forfeited the idea that deficits matter and that we should work hard to have a budget that's something near balanced. You won't hear any Republicans talk about that. There's no willingness to take on the hard issues, whether it be Social Security, Medicare, all of these systems that are predicated on having more young working people than old people, which we don't have in the United States anymore. There's no willingness to address economic realities, which I've always thought is one of the things that was kind of our primary tenants.

I'd say what I wish both parties would do differently is not think that the other side is the enemy. There's a disturbingly high percentage of Americans on both sides who think that physical violence is justified against the other side. That's a scary thing, right, and we're seeing that played out. Listen, I look at people who disagree with me as they might be wrong, might be right, they might be wrong, but that doesn't necessarily make them evil. Now, maybe there are evil people out there, but because they disagree with me on whether or not the budget should be balanced doesn't necessarily make them evil.

Phil Bredeesen: I think that just having some respect for the fact in both parties, there are a lot of different ways that people see the world and so on. I'm from a small town and I believe probably much more strongly in individual responsibility than my party does. It's just been important to me. And I don't know if it's right or wrong, but it's a pretty deeply ingrained belief and I wish the parties could be more understanding of the fact that it's not that one is right and one is wrong and this one has to win. There is always going to be this wide diversity of experiences and ways of approaching things and there's now evidence that some of it's genetic, just the way you're programmed to think about the world.

I thought the kind of genius of the founders of our country was to put together a system that could work in that environment. You're not trying to change everybody to a mono view, you're accepting the fact that there's a lot of different ones and we need to find a way to move forward. We are losing that I think quite obviously, but I think it's something we can return to.

Bill Haslam: I do think it's important. What I wish both sides realize is that the overwhelming majority of the country is not on our side. Both. We're an evenly split country. And so when Republicans get in a battle over who should be the Speaker of the House, et cetera, and they're trying to decide who should be most pure, they need to remember, now they're down to a two seat majority. Before they were at seven or eight seat. They have to realize there's a whole lot of the country that's voting differently and the same thing across the board. That should help our approach to political decisions to realize that a good part of the country does not agree with me despite the fact that everybody I live with and work with and worship with does.

Phil Bredeesen: Yeah. I think to add to that, I think people understand that people don't

necessarily agree with them about it. But what I would like them to understand is that really is okay. It's not because they're wrong or stupid or something else, it's a matter of they have a different set of life experiences. They're programmed to think about what's important in different ways. So I hope we can achieve that.

Marianne Wanamaker: The title of the podcast is "You Might Be Right," which implies that political decisions have a right or wrong. But I think what I'm hearing from both of you is that's not necessarily the case. You bring a different set of values to the table, which causes you to draw a different conclusion, and there may be preferences are different, but that doesn't mean that someone's right, someone's wrong.

Bill Haslam: I guess I'd push back a little. I actually do think there's a right answer. Like I said, on the issue of balanced budgets, we'll see one day whether keeping going further and further in debt was a bad, not having the courage to address that was a bad call. So I do think there's right, and we'll see if America deciding we want to pull back from our leading role in the world, if that was a good call in terms of just the international peace.

But having said that, also, I recognize somebody can disagree with me and not do it for bad motives. I understand you think that we should increase social programs because you have all these people that need a social or a safety net that have nothing, and if you were in that situation, you'd want help. I understand that. I just think you can't ignore the consequence of continuing to spend money we don't have. But I understand there's a different view on that.

Marianne Wanamaker: Governor Bredesen, is there right and wrong in politics?

Phil Bredesen: Sure. I think there's some. Bill touched on a couple issues I agree with him. I think things like on the deficit, we're going to figure out what's right and wrong in the future. But that's one where I'd say, "No, you really are on a fundamentally wrong path," and I think you could probably get agreement across the political spectrum if not cooperation to do anything, to do anything about it. But on a lot of things, we're dealing with all these social issues in the country and I think you've got people with very different life experiences that feel very differently about it or how important it.

I grew up in this rural community in upstate New York. I go up there occasionally and surprisingly, it's actually a lot like East Tennessee in a lot of ways. And you just realize that the kind of things I read about in the New York Times, it's just not on the radar of people. It's just not what they think about when they're in the grocery store and so on. I think speaking for myself as a Democrat, I think we have to reengage with some of these people.

Marianne Wanamaker: Governors, any other comments you want to share?

Phil Bredesen: I'm good. I've probably talked myself into some bad comments on the website already.

Marianne Wanamaker: You're not running for office again. You're good.

Bill Haslam: I think this is one of those issues, like I said, where being thoughtful about our approach to partisan politics does not mean that we don't have a partisan view. I want to be really clear about that. Realizing that the other side might be right doesn't mean that we don't take a partisan view. We do, because there's things that I strongly believe are right ways to govern. But also, know that this idea that the other side is not just wrong, but they're evil, and because of that, in some cases, physical violence might be justified, is not at all the path that our founders set us out on in this country.

Phil Bredesen: I agree with the Republican.

Marianne Wanamaker: Thank you both for sharing your insights with our audience.

Phil Bredesen: Thank you, thank you.

Marianne Wanamaker: Appreciate you.

Thanks for listening to "You Might Be Right." Be sure to follow on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen to your favorite shows. And please help spread the word by sharing, rating and reviewing the show.

Thank you, Governors Bredesen and Haslam, for hosting these conversations. "You Might Be Right" is brought to you by the Baker School of Public Policy and Public Affairs at the University of Tennessee with support from the Boyd Fund for Leadership and Civil Discourse. To learn more about the show and our work, go to youmightberight.org and follow the show on social media @YMBRpodcast.

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