You Might Be Right - Primary System - Transcript

Galen Druke: A democracy isn't a democracy just because people are casting votes. You have to think about what does the electorate look like? How many people are participating in the process? Is it actually getting the policy outcomes that are most favored by the electorate? We're pretty much the only democracy in the world that does it the way that we do our primary system.

Jonah Goldberg: We have a country now where both parties, certainly at the presidential level, but also at the state and local level, the party system has been hijacked, not by "the people," but by the most committed, most angry people who have a different incentive structure than picking candidates who can win general elections, and I think that's the fundamental problem.

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's Circle. To learn more about how you can support our work visit youmightberight.org.

In the 1970s, the two major political parties enacted a series of reforms that aim to make the presidential primary process more democratic and more transparent. How have these changes impacted candidates and voters, and is our primary system achieving those democracy and transparency goals? In this episode, our hosts, former Tennessee Governors Phil Bredesen and Bill Haslam, and their guests, discuss the modern presidential primary system, how it works, how it has changed politics, and if it ultimately reflects the will of the people.

Bill Haslam: Well, Phil, the long-awaited and seemingly far in the horizon 2024 election is upon us and I think for the next two episodes we want to turn our attention to the coming election, not just in the who the nominees are going to be and what are the issues, but how does the process work? Is the process that leaves us with these two nominees the very best process we can have?

Phil Bredesen: Yeah, I mean I can't remember a time since maybe the 1960s in my own experience where there's been as much distrust of and unhappiness with the whole process of choosing people, particularly with regard to the presidential race. And I think exploring – we've got some great guests to do it with – exploring just how that process might be improved, what's wrong with it, what are the results of what it is that we have, I think is an interesting subject. I'm glad we're doing it.

Bill Haslam: So today we're going to look at the primary system process – it's relatively new – and then answer some basic questions. What's the difference in a caucus and a primary? What's the difference in an open and a closed primary? What are the effects of the way that we're currently nominating each party's presidential candidate?

Phil Bredesen: Yeah, and I think there's also the question as to what extent do the primaries

bring forth somebody who genuinely represents a broad consensus of the views of that party? And some differentiation is probably healthy, it helps to hybridize things, but you also obviously can get people who are way, way, way out of step with the broad positions of the party, but have a very dedicated, narrow constituency that will make sure that they get through the process.

Bill Haslam: All right, a big year with the presidential election. Let's jump right into our conversations.

Phil Bredesen: Well Bill, we have our first guest, Galen Druke, who's with us today. He's the host and producer of the FiveThirtyEight Politics podcast. I hate having these experts on here with us.

Bill Haslam: I know, seriously.

Phil Bredesen: Which aims to explain politics through a mix of data analysis and traditional reporting as well as the United Stats of America video series. He's covered elections with FiveThirtyEight Politics since 2015. Before that he created a daily news magazine show on Wisconsin Public Radio. Has appeared on other news programs, NPR, WNYC On the Media, CBS, University of Cambridge's Elections. Galen, welcome. We are delighted to have you. Great of you to take the time.

Galen Druke: Thank you so much for having me. I'm blushing after that lengthy introduction, but I appreciate it. Thank you.

Bill Haslam: We're going to make you work for it right off the bat. You know a lot about how our primary system has developed and changed over the years. Can you give our listeners just a 30-second concise – how did we get here? What are the changes that have led us to the place we are right now?

Galen Druke: 30 seconds, okay, let's see if I can do this. Prior to the 1970s, the way that the parties chose their candidates for president was largely these, so-called smoke-filled rooms. Some states used caucuses, some states used primaries, but either way, they were largely selecting delegates to go to the national convention where they would wheel and deal on the convention floor and ultimately decide on who would be the nominee.

This is to say, that states were in many cases sending favorite sons, so to say, from those states, who were not necessarily running for president themselves, to the convention. And in some cases these delegates were chosen before people even announced for president. We didn't have the system that we have today where folks announce for president a year in advance of all of this. And that all changed because of the disastrous Democratic nominating convention in 1968, which sort of blew up in Democrat's face. There was violence outside the convention hall in Chicago, inside there was pandemonium, and there was arguments from activists largely who were opposed to the war in Vietnam that the nominating process for the Democratic presidential nominee was unfair. It didn't fairly include the various voices across the

Democratic Party because of these, so-called smoke-filled rooms. And so after 1968, the Democratic Party enacted reforms to open up the process. And because a lot of these reforms had to be made at the state level, those changes ultimately ended up affecting the Republican nominating process as well.

Bill Haslam: Yeah, case in point, correct me if I'm wrong, Humphrey who becomes the nominee in '68 doesn't run in any primaries, am I right?

Galen Druke: That's correct. You could, back in the day, jump in at the last minute and, as long as you had support on the convention floor from delegates, you could be a viable candidate. I think to put this sort of convention in perspective, you could think of it more like Congress than like the Electoral College. The Electoral College, we expect people to go and cast votes for president based on the votes in the state, and that's kind of how conventions work today. But prior to the 1970s, it worked like a lawmaking body where people actually do have to compromise. They're there to represent the voters and their hopes and dreams and desires for whoever the nominee is going to be, but really they sort of wheel and deal and then negotiate, compromise, whatever, and ideally come to some sort of conclusion about the person who best represents the party from a policy perspective, is perhaps most electable, and that's how nominees used to be chosen. Now it's a much more binding process.

Phil Bredesen: And do you think we've moved forward or backwards?

Galen Druke: Uff. Okay, tricky question. So I think it's complicated. In many ways, the reason that these changes were made is because the Democratic Party was not being responsive to its voters and there were parts of the party, I think specifically parts of the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, student protests, things like that, that felt like the party under LBJ and Hubert Humphrey were not actually being responsive. And so by opening up the process and giving more of a voice to people, I think you could say that it hews more to some of our democratic ideals.

But a democracy – this is the part where things get tricky – a democracy isn't a democracy just because people are casting votes. You have to think about what does the electorate look like? How many people are participating in the process? Is it actually getting the policy outcomes that are most favored by the electorate? Are the nominees representing the party platform? And I will say here that we're pretty much the only democracy in the world that does it the way that we do in our primary system now.

In most democracies, the parties themselves are responsible for choosing their nominees. Basically, they do it the way that we did it before the 1970s. And that means that a party creates its platform, it chooses its candidates, and then they put them forward. And yes, then the broader public gets to decide. And actually what we see is that in some of those systems, there is more diverse representation in who actually gets elected. The politicians themselves are sometimes even more responsive to the policy preferences of the public and that oftentimes money plays a less important role in politics because candidates have to be responsive to the

priorities of the party and not the priorities of outside in.

Bill Haslam: So as we're taping this, the Iowa Republican caucuses were just held. I had two nine-year-old grandsons spending the night with me the night of the caucuses and they asked me to explain the difference in a caucus and a primary, I'd give myself a B plus grade. But would you explain, what's the difference in a caucus in a primary? Maybe I got a B minus.

Galen Druke: I mean, okay, well. Let me try to do my best to explain and then you can reevaluate. With grade inflation these days, I'm sure everyone gets an A.

Phil Bredesen: I'm sitting here ready to grade, so get with it here.

Galen Druke: Okay, the difference between a caucus and a primary, both have changed since we've changed our system in the 1970s, but a primary is very similar to the way that you would vote in a normal general election. You have an election day, starting early in the morning through the evening, you can go and cast a secret ballot, and it takes as long as it takes to get through the line, and you carry on your way.

The way that a caucus works is they're set at a particular time, generally in the evening. You can think of it more as a party meeting that can take hours. People meet in high school gymnasiums or community centers, they talk about who they want to be president or who they want the nominee to be, they also talk about party business, so say the platform and things like that. Now, the way that the Republican Party does it is there are caucus captains who each get to give a speech in favor of one candidate or another. Then after that, everyone votes in an actual secret ballot – you just write down on a piece of paper or circle a name, you submit it, and that gets counted.

The way that the Democratic caucuses in Iowa used to work is that you would form preference groups around the gymnasium, and so you could literally see how many people were supporting whom, very much not a secret ballot, and you would go through several iterations of this and people actually had the opportunity to try to sway their friends and neighbors to support their preferred candidate throughout the process.

So it's a much more involved process than a primary. You have to dedicate hours of time, you have to be available in the evening in order to do this. And to give some sort of perspective on what the end result is, in the Iowa caucuses that just happened, there's about 5% turnout of registered voters in Iowa.

Bill Haslam: Like only a hundred thousand people voted in the Republican caucus, after all that time and money, et cetera, right?

Galen Druke: Yeah, it's a vanishingly small percent. And okay, you can blame it in part on the weather, but even when there isn't inclement weather, when both parties are having a competitive caucus in Iowa, the maximum turnout you'll see is like 16%, so say 8% on both

sides. It's kind of weird that we do it this way where Iowa goes first, it's perhaps even weirder that then the electorate within Iowa that gets to put such an imprint on the nominating process is so tiny.

Bill Haslam: Talk a little bit about open versus closed primaries. And part two of that question would be, there's always a lot of talk about crossover voting, "Well so-and-so won because he or she was a Republican candidate, but they've got a lot of Democrat crossover votes." After telling us the difference in open and closed primaries, is crossover voting a thing, and does it actually impact voting very frequently?

Galen Druke: So a prime example of an open primary would be New Hampshire where Independents are welcome to – which is the largest voting group in New Hampshire – are welcome to cast ballots in the Democratic primary or the Republican primary. I personally live in New York, which has a closed primary system, which means that you can only cast a ballot if you are registered with a party. So me personally, as an unaffiliated voter, I actually cannot participate in the primary process in New York state.

And, I mean, there is some crossover voting. I think we see in New Hampshire in particular that when only one side of the political spectrum is having a competitive primary, Independents will be more inclined to vote in that primary. So this year there's a more competitive primary on the Republican side, the Democratic primary is basically uncontested, and so we're going to see, we will see a lot more Independents casting ballots on the Republican side and that can make a difference.

But to put this in perspective, in Iowa, it's sort of a closed system, but you can actually register with the Republican Party the night of the caucus. I'm using this past caucus as an example. So even if you're a Democrat or if you're unaffiliated or what have you, you can show up, register with the Republican Party, and caucus according to whoever you want to be the candidate. So we do entrance polls as caucus goers are going into their high school gymnasiums or what have you, to get a sense of who is making up that electorate. And of all caucus goers in 2024, about 2 to 3% were Democrats. So that will give you some sense of when given the opportunity to join another party and try to sway the outcome, the degree to which that will happen.

Phil Bredesen: You've described literally crossover voting, Democrats going to a Republican caucus for example, but also in New Hampshire, as you say, the largest voting block is Independents, and I presume that's a little more fluid, that if you are an Independent you may do a little more picking and choosing which primary you want you want to take a ballot for and vote in. Do you see a lot more slosh of people going back and forth in a situation like that?

Galen Druke: Yes, I think you would say so, but I think it's important to keep in mind that Independents in the U.S. are not by and large people who just flip back and forth between the two parties from year to year in a sort of TV news caricature, are really just sitting in a diner being like, "Well, but on one hand the economy and on the other hand abortion, but on the other hand immigration and on the other hand, foreign policy."

Usually Independent voters, and New Hampshire is a little bit unique because it just has this, amongst the highest level of Independent voters in the country, it's a very non-religious state. It has a lot of libertarians. It has a high degree of four year college degree attainment levels. It's a unique state as far as things go, so I don't think that we can necessarily use New Hampshire as some indication of how the electorate behaves across the rest of the country, but usually Independents have a strong adherence to one party or the other. While we may have somewhere in the range of 30 to 40% of Americans identifying as Independents, it's only about, looking at polling, only about 8 to 10% of the American public that is really up for grabs in any given election and will switch back and forth.

Bill Haslam: Galen, There's a sense that our primary system is broken, and you could hear that from people all along the political spectrum, I think. What would happen if we just got rid of primaries?

Galen Druke: Well, we would be like lots of other countries around the world. We can answer this in an academic way and a more realist way. So normatively in America today, it would be unacceptable to do away with the primary system because we have this sense that the system is only fair if Americans have a direct input. They vote for the candidate who they want to be the nominee, and that's how it goes. And you can make arguments in favor of this process or against this process. Either way, most democracies don't do it this way. And the electorate in a primary is just really small. If the argument for democracy is that we want something representative of the American public, that's not necessarily what we're getting – or even just Republican voters or Democratic voters – that's not necessarily what we're getting from the primary system anyway.

So changes that would do away with the primary system would be seen by the public as very anti-democratic. And in fact, we hear all the time, "Oh, there isn't a competitive primary on the Democratic side this year because there's an incumbent, that's anti-democratic. That's pretty normal that there isn't a competitive primary when there's an incumbent, but already people feel like the system isn't fair. If you did away with the primary system, it would I think be in favor of something that works more like a national convention, that works like a congress.

We are used to not voting directly on policy in this country. We elect representatives to go to Washington to negotiate and compromise and come to conclusions. We don't question whether those policy outcomes are democratic. I mean maybe sometimes we do, but it's generally accepted in our democracy that representatives will do the wheeling and dealing and come to conclusions about what the policy should be. You could apply that same notion of democracy to choosing candidates, but we don't. That's how it would change, but I don't know that it would be accepted.

There's one more caveat here. Other democracies that allow either party leaders or party members, and in other democracies party membership is just a much smaller section of the public, people who show up to party meetings regularly. In many cases, pay dues, are helping

to craft the platform. It's not just registered voters. In other democracies, many of them are multi-party. And so if you don't like the direction of one party, you can literally go and create another party and win the presidency. Emmanuel Macron in France, for example, created a new party in order to run for president. Because we have such a strong two party system, if you don't like what one party is doing, you kind of only have the option of voting for the other party, not voting at all, or casting a ballot for a third-party candidate who will ultimately not win the election. In a system where the two parties are so strong, you might say Americans deserve more of a direct say in the nominating process than in a multi-party democracy.

Phil Bredesen: I have struggled with this issue. I mean I believe in small R republican government, the notion of electing people to do the wheeling and dealing, as you've put it. But on the other hand, I mean I'm someone whose political career came completely from the outside. I mean, if we had a caucus system in Tennessee, I would not have been the nominee. I'd never held office– I mean, as mayor and governor, but had not held office before, was something of an unknown in a world where my primary opponents were basically all very well established people who had serious, serious political positions. And for me that was good, but I also think it's healthy to in some way be able to hybridize the party and to bring new thoughts and new ideas into it. So is there a system of primary voting that still retains a better ability of outsiders to come in, that still retains that direct democracy but gets around some of the problems of the narrowness of the people who make decisions and the way in which it pushes both parties to the edges of the party?

Galen Druke: I think there is a hybrid system. We did a whole series on the primaries called the Primaries Project on the FiveThirtyEight Politics Podcast and we opened up the phone lines towards the end of the series for listeners to call in and say what they thought the ideal system might be. We also reached out to a bunch of different academics to ask them. One thing we heard a lot about was ranked choice voting.

So to give you some example, there were a lot of Republicans who were unhappy with Donald Trump's nomination in 2016. He only got about a third of support in those early states amongst the Republican electorate. I mean, he got 20 some percent support in the Iowa caucuses in 2016. I think there's a sense that if you had a rank choice voting system, then it sort of does that wheeling and dealing for you and you land on somebody who has majority support. It may not be the person with the strongest, most enthusiastic little third of support, but it is somebody who appeals across the different parts of the party. And the way that ranked choice voting works is you list all of the candidates in order from the person you most want for the job to least after everyone has voted, you basically put it into a machine and if nobody gets a majority on the first round, you eliminate the last place person and reallocate their second place votes. And you keep doing that until somebody reaches a majority. And the idea is that eventually you get a consensus candidate.

That's one potential way that you could do this. In fact, we have ranked choice voting to elect local positions here in New York City and that's how we elected our mayor most recently. There are states that have started using ranked choice voting in federal elections as well, Alaska and

Maine of note. So that's one possibility. The other possibility is that you get people more involved in the parties, you get people more involved in politics, in civics, and then the primary electorate becomes more representative of the broader public.

Bill Haslam: Galen, thank you. This has been incredibly insightful. As we begin to wrap up, the one question that we ask all of our guests is off of Senator Howard Baker's admonishment to us, to always remember that the other side might be right. Can you think of a time when you realized that another person or another idea than the one you held might be right?

Galen Druke: I'll tell you a story, 15 years ago my dad became vegan somewhat out of the blue. He was getting older and thinking about his health and retiring and he became, I like to call, a vegan evangelist. And basically bought a whole bunch of this book that in particular had convinced him to become vegan and specifically he likes to call it a plant-based whole foods diet. And he started lobbying basically everyone in my extended family, my brother, my sister, the people in his workplace to join him. And my immediate reaction was, "Hell no. This is not a road I'm interested in going down. I like meat and cheese, like most people."

But over time, over 15 years, I think he actually gave up on becoming an evangelist of veganism, and actually once he stopped trying to argue the point was when I started thinking, maybe he does have a point. While I am not a vegan today, I do for health reasons, again, this is mostly about heart disease or certain cancers or cholesterol or what have you for my dad, but for health reasons, I've slowly been convinced to cut more meat out of my diet. I think the lesson here is that sometimes when you try to convince people of something in an abrasive way, you create a blowback and you don't ultimately end up helping your position. But when you lead by example and you're a little more generous and open-minded with the people that you're trying to convince, sometimes they will see the light.

Bill Haslam: Thank you for giving us so much time. We appreciate the insight.

Galen Druke: Thanks so much. I've really appreciated talking to you two and I love what your podcast is all about, so I'm flattered to be here.

Phil Bredesen: Thank you. We appreciate it.

Bill Haslam: The interesting thing to me is our modern primary system is relatively recent. I mean it's really a 50-year-old system, which 50 years is a long time obviously, but it's remarkable that Hubert Humphrey didn't run in a primary and eight years before that, by this time in the 1960 election, JFK hadn't even announced he was running for president. So this process, this kind of grueling process of a state-by-state primary system is still relatively new to our democracy.

Phil Bredesen: And, of course, it really rewards people who have got very specific agendas and have the ability to raise money out of that. And I don't think that's the ideal of the founders of this country. I mean, I think they were much more interested in more generalists who had a

broad view of what the country needed.

Bill Haslam: Agreed. But I don't think anybody today would buy the smoke-filled room, the process that got Hubert Humphrey nominated to be the Democrat nominee in '68, I don't think any of us would go there. So we're on the continued search to find a better way.

Phil Bredesen: Well, if you think of something, give me a call.

Bill Haslam: I'd say our podcast listenership will go up if we solve this problem.
Well, I've been looking forward to our next guest, Phil. Jonah Goldberg is an acquaintance of mine and I'm a longtime listener of his. He's a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. He co-founded The Dispatch. He's also the host of The Remnant podcast where you can learn more about his dogs than you'll ever care to know. He was an editor with National Review for 21 years. His most recent book, he's written several bestsellers, but his most recent book is the Suicide of the West: How the Rebirth of Tribalism, Populism, Nationalism, and Identity Politics is Destroying American Democracy. You've probably seen him on Meet the Press, Face the Nation, This Week, State of the Union, several other shows. Jonah's a popular guest and we're glad that he came to us. He is, believe it or not, in New Hampshire, in early January, so we assume he's not there for the weather.

Phil Bredesen: Maybe he's skiing, do you think?

Bill Haslam: Governor Sununu has a good ski resort up there, we assume you're using him.

Phil Bredesen: Good. Well Jonah, thanks for being here. I want to just start out with kind of a general question. We live in a world right now, we seem to come back to every so often during my adult life where there's just a lot of general dissatisfaction with the state of the candidates who are standing for election and people talk about third party candidates and is the primary system really working? I just want to start out, because you're an expert with that, is the primary system that we have that's producing these candidates, I mean, is it fundamentally flawed in a way that it's not going to get us what's going to be acceptable over the long run? Are there changes we need to make in it? How does it fit in with your notion of how American democracy should work?

Jonah Goldberg: Well, first of all, I should have said earlier, thanks for having me. It's great to be here, fans of you both. I can rant about this quite a bit, but I'll try not to. So as Henry VIII said to each of his wives, "I won't keep you long."

Look, I think the primaries were well-intentioned. I think the primaries tried to fix a real problem – the lack of transparency, the smoke-filled rooms, all of that sort of thing. But they're a classic example of the unintended consequences of well-intentioned reform. And the net result is that we are the only advanced, industrialized democracy in the world whose parties have completely given up the ability to pick their own candidates. We have outsourced it to tiny slices of the electorate. There's a lot of political science research that says that the choices of the most

ardent, extreme, and committed primary voters actually pick less representative, less appealing candidates than would be picked if you actually let party leaders choose a candidate.

No other country does it this way. I mean France made some rules a few years ago that gets them closer to us. But basically the angriest people pick the angriest candidates they can get away with and it makes for an unrepresentative system. We have a country now where both parties, certainly at the presidential level, but also at the state and local level, the party system has been hijacked, not by "the people," but by the most committed, most angry people who have a different incentive structure than picking candidates who can win general elections. And I think that's the fundamental problem. Parties are supposed to be in the business of basically a handful of things, and one of them at the top of the list is to win elections. And that is no longer a primary concern, no pun intended, of the parties. In fact, there's a lot of data that shows that primary voters don't actually like their own parties, they just hate the other party more. And why you would outsource the decision of what candidate you would pick to those people makes very little sense to me.

Phil Bredesen: But do you think, I mean is it realistic in America today to think about heading back towards the smoke-filled rooms or is there some other way of picking it that's more sort of small R republican through some other mechanism?

Jonah Goldberg: Yeah, I mean look, I am not an expert on every possible reform. I think the jungle primary approach has some appeal to it.

Phil Bredesen: Would you explain for our listeners what you mean by that?

Jonah Goldberg: Yeah. So I mean there's a lot of different versions of it. You can talk about the way Alaska did it. You can talk about the way California did it. But basically the idea is everyone runs in a single primary, and it's basically rank choice voting. And again, there are different ways of doing it, but the gist of it is the most polarizing candidates, they can be– Everyone gets to vote on three or five candidates, and you rank them in order of preference. And so even if someone doesn't get a lot of number one slots, but they get a huge number of number two slots, they go onto a runoff. And what this does is it shaves off the most extreme candidates in a way that lets the most acceptable candidates to the most people rise to the top. So like Sarah Palin in Alaska, she was nobody's number two choice, but she was a number of people's number one choice, but not a majority of people. So those kinds of candidates who have strong and intense, but narrow and deep followings, they tend to fall by the wayside.

And so the analogies I often use is there's a reason why the most popular flavor of ice cream in America is vanilla. It's almost nobody's number one choice, it's nobody's favorite flavor, but it's the least objectionable to the most people, which is why you serve it at weddings, right? It's because no one complains that they got vanilla, a lot of people complain about some sort of boutique rocky road kind of flavor. And so that's one way of going.

Another way of going is party conventions, where they can be televised if you want, I'd be

against that. But the way they got Glenn Youngkin in Virginia was they realized, if they put this through a normal primary process in Virginia, there was no way you're going to get a candidate who could beat the Democrat in the election. So what they did was they actually invited people who had a little bit more skin in the game about wanting to put out candidates who are competitive, who are essentially good products in the political marketplace. And that's how Glenn Youngkin got the nomination and that's how he ended up becoming governor.

But if you look at the people that, like say Steve Bannon tried to put up in Republican primaries in 2018 or 2020 or even 2022, a lot of these Trump "mini-me" people are very popular among people who essentially detest the system, who say it's all got to be torn down and it's enough to get them the nomination, but then you put them in a general election and they're talking about how the election was stolen and the deep state is out there, all this kind of stuff, and they can't win in general elections. And you have the similar phenomenon on the left.

And so finding ways to find candidates who are attractive to the median voter in the middle rather than the most intense extreme voters on the fringe seems to me the kind of thing a smart party, that caress about its long-term interests, would do. But one of the biggest problems in our politics today is that the parties are too weak and weak parties create strong partisanship. It gets outsourced out of the parties, the parties themselves don't make the hard decisions about picking best general election candidates and supporting them in primaries to get them elected, instead, as my friend Ross Douthat said that the New York Times once put it, "both parties have become essentially fully fueled jet liners sitting on the tarmac waiting to be hijacked."

Bill Haslam: So Jonah, your description of people who have more skin in the game who are more invested would be some people's description of elites, which is about as big of a criticism as you can make of someone today. How do you get to something that you're talking about without people saying, "Well, they're just starting to go back to let all the big shots, whoever they are, make the decisions."

Jonah Goldberg: Yeah, it takes an educational process. We didn't get into this mess in a day and we won't get out of it in a day. It's like the word democracy, we all like democracy. I'm in favor of democracy, but I'm in favor of democracy for the things that democracy is good for. It's like when people say, "What's a better tool, a fork or a knife, or a fork or a spoon?" It depends on what you're eating. Forks aren't great for soup. And similarly, democracy is great for the things that democracy is good for. No one thinks that we should democratize the Marine Corps where every private gets the vote on what hill to take. No business says, "Yeah, the cashier should have an equal vote to the head of marketing." We don't do trials where we just put things out for a poll.

Bill Haslam: Jonah, can I stop you just for a second?

Jonah Goldberg: Yeah.

Bill Haslam: But the difference in that is everybody's clear with the Marines, they know, here's

what the Marine's mission is. In the grocery store example, we know we're trying to sell more Fritos or Twinkies or Campbell Soup or whatever it is we're trying to sell more of. That's not really true in a democracy, one person's mission objective is very different than the other. And so given that, I guess how does this work?

Jonah Goldberg: So first of all, I think you'd agree that whatever flaws America had, and they had many, we had many, we were a democracy prior to 1972 when we changed these rules for primaries. So democratizing the internal workings of parties is not the same thing as democratizing America.

It used to be, a political scientist wrote this famous report in 1950, democracy was the thing between parties, not the system within parties. The party's point – the mission of the party – is actually pretty clear is to build a coalition that is generally philosophically aligned that can win elections. That's Madison's argument about why parties form is that you build a– Think of it, you guys know coalition building better than I do, but farmers and ranchers don't necessarily have the exact same interest, but their interests are more aligned than those between say, farmers and bankers or railroads in the 19th century.

And so the whole point is you build a coalition where you tell the members of your coalition, "You can get 60, 70% of a loaf if you join in in this fight, if the other team wins, you're going to get nothing." And so people make compromises, and so parties are supposed to craft compromises to build coalitions to win elections to put forth a general program that its members believe in. When you democratize the internal decision-making of parties, you end up outsourcing those arguments to Sean Hannity and Rachel Maddow. You end up saying the people who are angriest and/or are listening to talk radio or listening to crazy stuff on the internet show up and you get to have an equal say in what the priorities of the party are.

That's not how any serious institution works. Newspapers do not put it out for a plebiscite about what stories to cover. Hospitals don't put it out for a vote about what diseases to treat. And so having the parties be more mission aligned, and stronger and able to make hard decisions, harder long-term decisions would actually, I think, strengthen democracy because healthy parties are essential to democracy and between campaign finance reform and the primary system, we've basically gelded them and now they're just basically free-floating brands and the second you become president, you get to decide what a party is for or against and that's just not the way it's supposed to be. The parties are supposed to constrain presidents a little bit, now presidents constrain whatever a party wants to do.

Phil Bredesen: What you say makes sense, except, I mean I'm old enough to remember 1968 and some of the issues that helped to make the world we're in today in terms of how primaries and how they work, but that was in reaction to a real issue, a party, the Democratic Party, whose elders were very sort of insensitive to a lot of things that were going on in the country and people felt strongly about. How do you prevent that from happening again? I mean, if we happen to be the same party and we're two elders and we're part of the establishment to make these choices–

Jonah Goldberg: We're definitely two elders.

Phil Bredesen: Me more than you. And just try to figure out how to have the kind of stability and mission focus you're talking about, but not get stuck in this kind of conservatism of age and this is the way we've always done it and so on. How do you make that happen?

Jonah Goldberg: Yeah, no, it's a good question. And I started out by saying that the reforms were corrective to real problems, and I think that's true. So you don't have to go, I mean, I'm a cigar guy, so I have no inherent bias against smoke-filled rooms, but you don't have to go all the way back to that. You don't even have to get rid of primaries entirely, you just don't have to make them the only decisive factor.

I mean, we just got finished with the Iowa caucus, which I know it's a caucus not a primary, but the same principle applies, where this tiny slice of, forget the Iowa electorate or the American electorate, but this tiny slice of the Republican electorate in Iowa has this outsized influence over these decisions. Pulling back a little on that and giving grownups in the party the ability to screen for candidates, have harder rules about how you get to become a candidate, maybe have better rules about how the parties can help support candidates they believe would be more competitive in a general election.

I mean, I used to get asked a bunch, "How did the Republican Party even allow this George Santos guy to run?" And my answer is, "Well, because he filled out a form and paid a $35 fee and got on a stage." I mean, you can have some screening process so you have some ability to sort of say, "We're not going to let whack jobs and demagogues use our brand."

I personally think it was outrageous that the Democratic Party let Bernie Sanders run in 2016 as a Democrat. The guy had been a pain in the ass for the Democratic Party as an Independent and a Socialist for decades. Similarly, I think in a healthy system, Donald Trump wouldn't have been allowed to run for president, or he certainly would've been required to participate in the debates. There are all sorts of rules that a party as a private organization can impose on people that want to borrow the credibility of their brand name.

Now, could you go too far in the other way? Sure. It's sort of like my arguments – I'm a big believer in federalism, could you go too far in correcting for the problems that I think exist out there and go to Jim Crow or something like that, that would be really bad and you shouldn't do that. But you can come up really short of the nightmare scenarios and just make the parties more healthy.

Phil Bredesen: Suppose that one or the other of us decided to get back into politics and became governor and–

Jonah Goldberg: We'd get you the best doctors.

Phil Bredesen: Yeah, it's not likely, but–

Bill Haslam: Speak for yourself, I was getting ready to announce on this podcast. Yes.

Phil Bredesen: You were? Wow. Okay, well, this may strain–

Jonah Goldberg: You're the No Labels candidate?

Phil Bredesen: This may strain our relationship. I don't know here yet.

Bill Haslam: I'll at least get kicked off the podcast.

Phil Bredesen: You'd like to make some changes and to do it in the real world of things that you can argue for and are sensible steps in the right direction. Of all the possibilities out there to fix this, where would you point one of us? Where would you say, "Okay, this is what you do as the first step or the second step?

Jonah Goldberg: Good question. I don't have super satisfying answers. I mean, I can either do the 50,000-foot one, which is sort of a dodge, and say teach people about civics better because I think a lot of our problems stem from just general civic ignorance. I can go a hundred thousand feet, this is the point of my last book, and teach people gratitude in this country, to actually be grateful for this country that we've got and the system that we have. And therefore, when you teach people to be grateful, they– When people have gratitude, it opens their heart, it makes them want to preserve and protect things. When you teach people entitlement and grievance, they think the current system all needs to go.

If you want to get closer to the grassroots, I think these continued experiments with rank choice voting and jungle primaries, they're a step in the right direction. There are concrete things that we could do about campaign finance reform that I'm not sure they can pass muster with the Supreme Court currently. But I think Mitch McConnell was absolutely right in his opposition to the campaign finance reforms of the 1990s where he said, "Look, you're not getting money out of politics, you're getting the parties out of politics."

One of the biggest drivers of polarization in America today are small donors, because at least big donors, say what you will about them, they actually have a long-term time horizon for the most part. And they can be completely wrong or they can be completely right or someplace in the middle. But a lot of politicians today, they monetize making people momentarily angry for some five minute hit on cable news saying, "Send me your 50 bucks now and I'll tear down the deep state." Or, "I'll show those DEI guys." Or, "I'll do whatever." And basically they're just monetizing rage. So there's a lot of that kind of stuff that I think smarter people than me would maybe with a law degrees could get to work on. I also think fixing Congress is hugely important, but that's very, very difficult when both parties basically think the only thing they need to do is turn up the game on their base voters to 11 one more time and then they'll control everything. One thought experiment I have, which I do think is unconstitutional, and that's the only reason

I'm against it, but if you think about what mandatory voting would do, which a lot of countries have, Australia and that kind of thing, if you required everyone to vote, this idea of only turning out the base goes away because if everyone's voting, then it's no longer about intensifying the turnout of one side or another side. It's about being more attractive as a candidate or as a party to the median voter.

And when I was growing up in politics, nevermind when you guys were growing up in politics, politics was all geared towards, you may veer to the Left or the Right in the primary, but then in the general you cared about the median voter, you cared about the swing voter in the center, and that's gone from our politics because of all sorts of demographic things, the big sort, the way the parties operate generally, this idea like working with the other party is collaboration or villainy. Some of these things need to be fixed by insiders who aren't embarrassed to be insiders, by members of the establishment that aren't ashamed to say they're a member of the establishment. I mean, earlier you said about how elite is a dirty word, and I think that's right. I get very tired hearing about people saying how the elites are all bad because most of the people I actually hear saying that on TV are elites.

Phil Bredesen: Exactly. Yes.

Jonah Goldberg: Don't tell me Ted Cruz is not an elite. Love him or hate him, the guy's a senator, his wife works for Goldman Sachs–

Bill Haslam: Harvard Law.

Jonah Goldberg: He was the solicitor general of Texas, of course he's an elite! But everyone's afraid to say that they're actually people of responsibility and they have certain obligations that even if they're unpopular, they got to do them. And I think it's a problem of institutional leadership and character that is driving a lot of our stuff.

Bill Haslam: I actually agree. I mean, one of the lessons I think we both learned from being in office is all this is harder than it looks on TV. That making hard choices is hard, and doing hard things is hard, and getting legislators to do hard things is even harder.

So great, let me ask you, you mentioned earlier about the theme of your book being the loss of gratitude. I think another virtue that's gone out of style is humility, and one of the hallmarks of humility is realizing you might not always be right. This podcast takes its name from Senator Howard Baker, who, a small town in East Tennessee, and in his own way of saying, he said, "Always remember the other fellow might be right." Can you think of times, maybe particularly on a policy related issue where you can say now, "Now in hindsight, I don't think I had that exactly right. I think the other side or the other person might've been right."

Jonah Goldberg: Oh gosh. I mean, it's one of those things where there are so many that you run the risk of forgetting all of them.

Bill Haslam: That's a good answer. That's a good answer.

Jonah Goldberg: And I'll start, just because I wrote my LA Times column about this recently, I used to have a pretty skeptical view of The War Powers Resolution, the War Powers Act, where Congress basically gets to hit the brakes on presidential use of force.

I used to think, because I grew up as a Reagan kid, that was just wrong, and that an executive power is a role. I still basically think the constitutional argument is on the executive branch, but I've become, as much as I've talked all this time about weak parties, I'm even more passionate about the weakness of Congress. I've become a congressional supremacist. And I used to be wrong about that, I used to have nothing... "There those clowns go again," I was one of those guys for a very long time, and now I firmly believe that the legislative branch is the most important branch, that it is the place that it's supposed to soak up political disagreement, and when it doesn't, the politics spills out all over the place.

Bill Haslam: Jonah, thank you so much. This has been a great conversation. We really appreciate you spending time with us, and good luck with the weather up in New Hampshire.

Jonah Goldberg: Thanks, I appreciate it.

Phil Bredesen: We appreciate it, thank you.

I found this encouraging. I've been asked so many times, and I'm sure you have, "Well, what would you do," basically. And I've never really had a good answer. There's been some ideas about what kind of things you could do, the bringing of rank choice voting into it. And it's nice to know there's some people who are thinking about this in a constructive way.

Bill Haslam: Listen, I think one of the good things about being in a ditch that, like I said, I think most people would say we're in today, is it forces you to think about how are we going to get out of here and what's going to be the process to do that? I do think that one of the difficult things is you're going to have to get people that are currently in power to vote to change the way things work that got them in power, and that's always difficult.

Phil Bredesen: You have to wait for some time when the stars align in some way or the planets align that something like that can happen. It's tough, but I come away with a little more of a hopeful feeling about it than I had when I walked in.

Bill Haslam: Well, that's good. I think the real reason both of us are doing this is having served between us in public office for 32 years or something like that, I think we both are convinced that this stuff really matters. It really does matter that we elect people who are trying to solve problems and not just make a point. And my hope is that the current discussions that are happening all across the country about how can we have a better process will ultimately lead people to be willing to take the steps necessary to do that.

Phil Bredesen: A lot of people that I talk with simply complain about the personalities of the people who are involved, but I think it's much deeper than that. I mean, there are structural things in the way that our system is put together that invites certain personalities and invites certain behavior, and those need to be changed. I mean, yes, if everyone who ran for office was a saint, we'd have world peace and–

Bill Haslam: And neither of one of us would've ever been elected.

Phil Bredesen: Right. But focusing less on the individuals and more on how we got there and how the structure permits this, I think is an important thing to do.

Bill Haslam: Thanks again.

Phil Bredesen: Enjoyed it.

Marianne Wanamaker: 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.

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This episode was produced in partnership with Relationary Marketing and Stones River Group.