You Might Be Right - Third Parties - Transcript

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Bill Galston: If you're not part of the two party system, you get ahead in American politics in one of two ways. Either you take over one of the two existing parties or you form a party that displaces one of the two existing parties the way the Republicans ended up displacing the Whigs.

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.

America's process for electing our president involves a series of winner-take-all primaries across the country. The process makes it very difficult for a candidate from a third party to break through and receive any electoral votes, and it has for all practical purposes, created a two-party system. Has this system effectively served as a source of moderation as intended and could a third party candidate be successful in 2024?

In this episode, our hosts, former Tennessee Governors Phil Bredesen and Bill Haslam, and their guests discuss the pros and cons of the two party system and what it would take for our next elected president to represent neither one.

Bill Haslam: Well, Phil, welcome back. Forever it seemed like the 2024 elections were something that were way out there, far off on the horizon that were talked about and speculated about, but not really in front of us.

Phil Bredesen: Do you think we could go back to that time?

Bill Haslam: Well, it's a good question because I think one of the things we're going to talk about today is does a third-party candidate make sense? Is it a viable proposition politically and is a good thing for the country? Because as your question intimated, I think record numbers of people are saying, "I'm not certain I'm going to like the choice that I'm going to have this year."

Phil Bredesen: I think, I guess during my adult lifetime, there've been a couple of times when a third-party candidate just come in. You think about Ralph Nader back then.

Bill Haslam: Perot.

Phil Bredesen: And it just seems like it never really introduces anything, anything interesting

and useful. It just becomes a spoiler for somebody and confuses things. If you're not happy with what you have now, we at least ought to be talking about what some of the alternatives are. We got some great guests today to do that.

Bill Haslam: Let's jump right to it.

Phil Bredesen: Let's do it.

Bill Haslam: Well, Phil, we're thrilled to have Dan DiSalvo with us this morning. He's a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute and a professor of political science at the Colin Powell School at the City College of New York. His scholarship really focuses on American political parties, so he's a perfect guest for us to have. Elections, labor union, state government and public policy. He's the author of Engines of Change: Party Factions in American Politics and Government Against Itself: Public Union Power and Its Consequences. He writes frequently for various scholarly journals and we're thrilled to have him with us this morning.
Dan, thanks for joining us.

Dan DiSalvo: My pleasure.

Phil Bredesen: Dan, I'd like to just start out. You have such an impressive resume and you spent so much time in this field. It seems like every couple of decades or something, at least in my adult lifetime, we've come around to a point of just a lot of dissatisfaction with two parties and talk about third-party candidacies and all those kinds of things. They never seem to go anywhere except to be spoilers.

What I want to ask you is with your historical sense and study, why are we a two-party country? I mean, do we have structural things that make that happen that way? Is there something we should be doing to give people more choices or things they want closer? Why are we a two-party country?

Dan DiSalvo: Well, the big thing really goes back to the U.S. Constitution and you could say the basic rules of the game, and this is about the way our election system is structured, which sometimes has various names applied to it. First-past-the-post elections, winner-take-all elections or sometimes plurality elections, all that means, all those fancy words is just that whoever wins the most votes wins. That's true for congressional elections, for the Senate elections, and it's also true for winning electoral college votes for the presidency.

The result of that is simply to strongly encourage a two-party system simply because if you have three candidates in a race, and even if two of them get 30% each and that's 60% of the vote and one candidate gets 40%, that candidate with 40% even though it's less than a majority of the vote, wins all the votes. So that gives a powerful incentive, you could say, for the other two candidates to combine in the future, and that's this strong first-past-the-post thing, and that's true for all of these races. So that's this big structural feature baked into our political system really from the beginning that strongly incentivizes a two-party system.

Phil Bredesen: Do you think during the constitutional convention, was that thought about explicitly? I mean is that system kind of an accident of other things or was it really designed for that result?

Dan DiSalvo: I don't think it was designed explicitly for that result, especially given the fact that most of our founding fathers were like many Americans today, quite skeptical of political parties. I mean, you could look back at many statements by Thomas Jefferson who wouldn't go to heaven if he had to go there with a political party. John Adams' great fear of two parties dividing the country, Washington's farewell address.

So in that sense, I doubt they conceived of it this way and certainly the way the electoral college system has worked for presidential elections has never quite, with the exception of the election of Washington, has never quite worked the way the founders designed it in the first place.

Bill Haslam: Given that, like I said, I think those questions, did we end up here by accident or was this what was foreseen, you've argued fairly forcibly that the answer is not a third party. The answer is stronger political parties, that the parties are too weak. What do you mean by that? And then, I think we have a couple of questions off of there.

Dan DiSalvo: Yeah, I think a fair way to characterize our current political parties is they're in a sense too strong where they should be weaker and they're too weak where they should be stronger. You could start here by thinking about the control over nominating candidates, which beginning in the 1970s was really removed from the parties and put over to primary voters, to voters and primary elections. So parties don't have this easy control over who are going to be their candidates.

You would've had parties that were much more closely connected in our historical past institutionally to people on the ground. Now, parties of these very centralized in Washington, state party organizations are fairly weak, and in that sense the parties as organizations are much weaker and this has made individual candidates and their particular communications much stronger. So you could see this when much of the Republican Party apparatus, for example in 2016 was skeptical of Donald Trump's candidacy and people are saying, "Well, the party should do something about this." But that was a kind of ridiculous request because the party institutionally had really no strength or levers to pull on doing that.

Finally, I guess I would say on this point is the parties become quite strong as modes of people's identification, and this is this problem of polarization in the country, pulling people apart and people identifying at least some slice of Republicans and Democrats really strongly identifying with their party or strongly disliking the opposing party. So in that sense, that aspect is almost where the parties are a little bit too strong in this sort of negative partisanship about the other side.

Bill Haslam: So interesting distinction there. The parties are too strong in terms of their

identification and their differentiation from the other side, if you will, not strong enough in terms of providing leadership. People are always saying, "Well, why doesn't the party or why doesn't somebody do something about that?" And I always make the comment, "You have to realize there are no elders. There are no elders left who have the kind of sway that people think that someone does."

Given that, given that I think that's not just true in political parties, it's true of institutions kind of increasingly across society, is it realistic to think that parties can be strong, that there will be some sort of elders, elders, men and women who step forward and provide the kind of leadership and that the party accepts that?

Dan DiSalvo: Well, I think it's going to be a slow and incremental process. I agree with you that we don't have this idea that Americans had in the past of a kind of establishment that was respected, titular leaders, former governors like yourselves that could step in and could provide this kind of leadership.

However, I do think it would be possible, more beginning at the state and local level, to make some changes to the primary systems that would give some advantage to the institutional party that would allow the party to at least have a little more control over who its candidates are going to be, the sorts of communications that they're going to send out rather than this broader, you could say, free for all of our current candidate-centered system.

Phil Bredesen: I'm a Democrat and ran here in Democratic primaries to become governor. One of the things though that I'd be hesitant to give up is the right to make some determinations of your own about issues as opposed to being forced in a way that some other systems are to adopt the parties.

And I used to conflict a lot with the national party in Washington and I'm in a conservative state trying to navigate those issues and they would get upset with me and I would just say, "Well, I'm an elected Democratic official. I've been through the primary system. I've gotten elected. I have as much to say about what the party believes, what are the important things to the party as that anybody does I think."

That seems like a lot to give up to me to turn over to the parties, that much more control over the messaging and so on.

Dan DiSalvo: I guess my first reaction would be, where are we now relative to your experience? Is the balance shifted much more toward the candidate centered of people doing what they want or is it the party guiding or shaping?

I think two points worth mentioning here is this increasing nationalization of American politics. Some years ago there was an old quip by a famous political scientist, Nelson Polsby. We didn't have a two-party system. We had 102 party system. That is to say there were the Democrats and the Republicans in each state and they were quite different, meaning Democrats in

Tennessee were not the same as Democrats in my home state of New York. Republicans in New York were different from Republicans in Tennessee such that. But that balance as it seems shifted quite a bit in recent years towards this increasing nationalization through media and communications, in a sense squeezing out the parties.

So I agree with you. We wouldn't want to give up on allowing candidates to differentiate themselves, but whether they're going to fully differentiate themselves is another question.

Bill Haslam: Is a successful third party more likely to form around an idea, a galvanizing candidate or just frustration with the current situation? What's the best water for that to develop in?

Dan DiSalvo: Well, I think if we think just confine ourselves to presidential elections, there's really been most third-party candidates in the, you could say the modern era post-World War II have been largely the vehicles of the individual ambition, of individual people, whether that's Ross Perot or Ralph Nader or John Anderson in 1980. Examples like that are really about, you could say, around an individual.

Now, some parties also have a kind of idea or ideological hue to them, which is you could say maybe the Green Party would fit into that role. At the state and local level I think it's different. It's less the individual ambition in a party forming around an individual, but something like the Green Party in California and other third parties at the state and local level, which tend to have a more ideological hue to them.

Phil Bredesen: We have a situation where I think both of us feel where huge numbers of people are just kind of disgusted with or discouraged about the system today. It focuses a lot of times around the, I think right now around the presidential race, but it's got other aspects as well. Giving people a third party outlet is not practical or desirable. I mean, what do you think? I mean if we were back in the middle of practicing politics, what do you do to address those issues?

Dan DiSalvo: That's a huge and difficult question.

Phil Bredesen: That's why I get the big bucks here at this podcast.

Dan DiSalvo: Right. A huge and difficult question. I mean, in some ways when it comes to the dissatisfaction with the system and the desire for a third party, these two things are co-mingled if you look at the survey data, which is to say there's been a huge uptick in support for the idea of a third party in polling over the last couple of years, and certainly an uptick in dissatisfaction, and these things are kind of correlated.

Now, that's to say the expression of support for a third party is also expression of support for a general idea, not about any particular candidate or any particular party. And one could imagine that once a particular party emerged or a particular candidate emerged, that support might well

fall. And so it's more for an abstract idea.

And then also digging into the dissatisfaction with the political system. Again here I often wonder, is it really a dissatisfaction over public policy, over the policies being adopted by the government, or is it really much more some of these concerns that have emerged in the last decade or so that are almost more identitarian, people's identities bound up in this, whether that's, and their sense that they're winning or losing on cultural issues. And those are much harder to address in policy terms.

So one wonders whether some of this isn't partly about communications as much as it is about whether you're passing the Inflation Reduction Act.

Bill Haslam: Dan, I think you're spot on that a lot of it is more about identity. My side's losing the culture war. This is going to be the end of the country as we know it if we don't rally here. But amidst that, I think you also, one of the things that regardless of what you think about Donald Trump, he turned a lot of low-propensity voters into regular voters, into consistent, highly likely voters for him. Corresponding though there's a lot of people who used to be regular voters who have now said, "I'm just too frustrated and exhausted. I quit. I'm not playing anymore." Is there a way to, and maybe this is what you're talking about with communication, is there a way for a third-party candidate to go in and say there's a huge unclaimed market here that's just waiting for the right person with the right communication skills to be able to go in and claim?

Dan DiSalvo: Well, it's certainly possible. I think this idea has become most clear with the speculation over what No Labels has been up to. And here I think the issue on the Republican side is that first, while Trump and MAGA have definitely mobilized some people who weren't really participating before, that number is probably larger than the number that's really disaffected on the Republican side, which is to say there's really a strong kind of conservatism, broadly speaking on the Republican side, such that a No Labels candidate probably wouldn't draw that much a centrist, let's say, third-party candidate wouldn't draw as much from the Republicans as it would draw from the Democrats, in part because the identifiers with the Democrats are like, this has been the concern on the Democratic side, people who identify as strong liberals or progressives are smaller portion of the party, and people who identify as moderates are a much larger portion and therefore more susceptible or more open to some kind of centrist position.

So I do think that there's a bit of a disequilibrium between those two parties as to how appealing would be some kind of centrist candidate, whoever that person would be and whatever policy issues they tried to project.

Phil Bredesen: I want to come back though and just push you a little bit on what we should do. I mean, we've both been in the governor's chair and if one of us went back there tomorrow for some unknown reason and we're saying, "Look, this lack of confidence in the system that we have is really problematical for what we think a democracy ought to be and how it ought to work and how citizens ought to act." And it comes down to, okay, but what are you going to do about

it? Is there some legislation you propose? Is there some change in the way voting and things happen in the state? I mean, if I called you up, if it were me and I called you up and said, "Look, I want to act. What's the most effective thing to do to at least start the ball rolling," where would you point me?

Dan DiSalvo: Well, I think here some of the things that Tennessee has already done is interesting. And at the University of Tennessee, you could even say that the Baker School and the Institute for American Civics is in some sense on education, both at higher education as I just mentioned, and at the elementary and secondary level, a refocus on American civics.
I think there's mounting evidence to suggest that while Americans are turning out to vote more, adult Americans, they're less well-informed than in the past about the basic features of our constitutional system, and a stunning number in some recent polls, as much as 20% couldn't name one, of adults, couldn't name one branch of the national government. That's deeply problematic. And I think that's both at you could say the level of low information voters, but also the level of college educated and higher information voters who just haven't been versed in key features of our political system, our political history.

So starting with education might be a first place to begin, and some policy initiatives, both you could say at the higher education level and elementary and secondary level could reinvigorate that and perhaps improve the quality and character of our public debate and citizens' evaluation of how the government is actually functioning.

Phil Bredesen: Okay. And we're obviously both deeply involved with the Baker Center. So now I'm governor and you've told me kind of to call up the Baker Center and tell them to get to work. And that's an interesting question. You have a long academic background. What are the kinds of things that an institution like that, and there certainly could be and I'm sure will be others in other states, can do from the platform of higher education to help restore more competence and belief in the system?

Dan DiSalvo: I think it's really getting, this is at the K12 level, and if you just look at how much of basic American history is taught in the K12 schooling levels in many states, it's really fallen by the wayside, and some of this even at the college and university level. Not just the basics of you need however many votes in the House and Senate to pass the law and then it's signed by the president, but really to dig in deeper and in a sense in a grittier way.

Maybe this is my coming from New York, but people have to understand that our system is designed in some ways to generate conflict between the legislative and the executive, and that's natural and normal part of the system, and it's also designed to be slow and in a sense require a pretty broad national consensus before you legislate on matters of major public concern.
So if the country's very divided and the national government isn't acting with great alacrity, the system's actually working the way it's supposed to be designed to work, but that's not appreciated if you don't understand that kind of gritty quotidian reality of how the institutions are structured.

Phil Bredesen: It's interesting. When I was governor, and of course you get frustrated with the legislature from time to time.

Bill Haslam: Never happened to me.

Phil Bredesen: And I remember going up and talking to a fellow who had been a professor of mine in college and was complaining to him about it, and he just said, "Stop. Stop. Stop. That's what they're supposed to do. I mean, that's what it was designed to do in the first place and to generate that kind of conflict." And as a matter of fact, I mean, I guess one of my complaints looking at it now is just the feeling that the Congress is not doing that. It suddenly sees itself as soldiers for the presidency as opposed to a check and a balance.

Bill Haslam: Let us ask you one last question that we ask all of our guests. This podcast takes its name from Senator Baker's quote about always remember that the other person might be right. Can you think of a time, particularly in the areas we're talking about in your, whether it be your political philosophy or your view of some issue or how to solve a problem when you realized that the other side or the other person might be right?

Dan DiSalvo: Well, it's a terrific question, and in fact, I can think of so many times. I guess maybe this comes through–

Phil Bredesen: We're all like that.

Bill Haslam: That's a good sign by the way. That's a healthy sign.

Dan DiSalvo: This perhaps comes from being an academic, but it's often the case where maybe I didn't have a strongly formed view on a particular policy question and someone who was better informed about it than I did said, "Well, you should really think about it in this way." I can think about that in numerous policy areas, probably mostly, in fact, learning more about recent environmental policy issues where some of my more liberal colleagues have persuaded me on a couple of points related to just what we should be doing or trying to do to address the issues of climate change that I've been more – I've had my head turned around in a few instances.

Phil Bredesen: Thank you for your thoughts on this. It's been really interesting. I think that there's a lot of conversations going to happen over the course of this next year about just not only who wins the presidency and who wins the state elections, but just how the process is working and where it shortcomings are. Keep writing.

Dan DiSalvo: Well, thank you.

Bill Haslam: Yeah, thanks Dan. We do appreciate not just your time here, but your contribution. I'm with Phil. I think more and more Americans are saying, "Well, my candidate may or may not get elected, but regardless, it doesn't feel like this is working very well," and we appreciate your

scholarship and that of so many others. Thanks for joining us.

Dan DiSalvo: It's been my pleasure. Thank you for having me on.

Bill Haslam: Thanks.

Phil Bredesen: The problem with parties is they're too powerful in some areas and not powerful enough in others is a fresh notion for me, it's worth thinking about. I think there's something to that.

Bill Haslam: I do like the way he distinguished between the party's identification, the people who are saying, here's what we're arguing about versus there some sort of direction to the issues and consistency about here's who we are and here's what we believe.

Phil Bredesen: I was just always running as a Democrat in a more conservative state, was always hopeful that no one would ever try to hold me to the national party's agenda or something and reserve the right to have a somewhat different view.

Well, Bill. We have another great guest, Bill Galston. He's a senior fellow at the Brooking Institutions Governance Studies program. He writes for the Wall Street Journal of Politics and Ideas columns. He was the stern professor and acting dean at the School of Public Health at University of Maryland and director of the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy there, served as deputy assistant to President Clinton for domestic policy from '93 to '95. He's the author of multiple books, nine of them I believe, hundreds of articles in the fields of political theory, and I suspect we're going to learn a lot from him.

Bill Haslam: Bill, let me jump right into it. There's record levels of dissatisfaction with the two presidential candidates that appear at this point to be the nominees for their party. One of the ideas that keeps getting floated is why don't we have a third-party candidate? It seems like there's all these disaffected, disenchanted people. Is a third-party candidate the idea to get us out of the ditch it feels like we're stuck in? What's your response to the concept?

Bill Galston: Well, my response to the concept is it's a fine idea for another country. But in the American first-past-the-post political system, there is really almost no room for a third party, and that explains why no third-party candidate has ever won the presidency of the United States in our entire history.

If you're not part of the two party system, you get ahead in American politics in one of two ways. Either you take over one of the two existing parties or you form a party that displaces one of the two existing parties the way the Republicans ended up displacing the Whigs. If you try to do it as a third force with the two established parties alive and well, the best you're going to be able to do is what Teddy Roosevelt did in 1912. Incredibly popular, charismatic, former president, still young and vigorous, split from the Republican Party, ran as the head of the Bull Moose ticket, got 28% of the vote, won some electoral votes, but did not get close to winning the presidency.

If TR couldn't do it, who could?

So no, I don't think it's an idea whose time has come, and I think probably as long as the structure of American politics remains the way it is, it is an idea whose time will never come.

Phil Bredesen: Talk a little bit about the structure of that and what it is about the system that we have as distinct from, for example, any number of European governments and so on that make it easy and invite in multi-party participation. How did we get to be a two-party country?

Bill Galston: Well, the standard formula, and we saw it first in the United Kingdom, is to have a system of geographical representation where the candidates who gets the most votes wins the election. If those two conditions are satisfied, then it's going to be a very difficult road for a third party to hoe.

The UK right now has two and a half political parties, which, and I think it's a tribute to the Liberal Democrats, the Lib Dems, that they've been able to sustain themselves at all. They've been able to do it because their particular brand of high educated centrist moderation has appeal in certain districts in the UK. They get between 10 and 40 seats out of 635 depending on the time of day and the climate, but they are not close to being competitive with the two major parties.

So if you want a multi-party system, a very good way to get it is a voting system of proportional representation. As a matter of fact, you're guaranteed to get it under PR. But if you don't use proportional representation, then it's really winner take all, and that means that third parties are usually on the nothing side of the all or nothing equation.

Bill Haslam: So Bill, what you're saying is, for those folks who are just extremely frustrated by where we are in today's politics, that there's really a couple of alternatives. You change the rules so it's not winner take all, number one, which feels like it'll be very difficult to me, or you have another party actually replace, like the Republicans did with the Whigs, replace one of the two major parties. Both of those from the chair I'm sitting in feel like really next to impossible to do. Am I missing something?

Bill Galston: You're missing just a little bit and that's my fault, not yours. Because there is a way in which third parties can have an influence even if they don't win a victory, and that is by convincing one of the two major parties that there are important constituencies and important issues that they haven't been paying enough attention to. And I can give you an example from personal experience.

I was the number two guy on the Domestic Policy Council in Bill Clinton's White House for the first two and a half years, and I can tell you that Ross Perot's insurgency, which focused on two issues, one of which was fiscal probity had an impact on budget considerations early in the Clinton administration. Bill Clinton had to make a choice between a relatively fiscally responsible interest rate oriented approach to his first couple of budgets on the one hand and on the other

hand a more expansive, stimulus oriented, more traditional democratic budget, and he opted for the former, I am convinced in part because Ross Perot garnered 19% of the popular vote, which was a very strong showing for a third party candidate.

In a similar vein, if you want to look back in history, the Progressive Party insurgency of the 1920s advocated some of the programs that were ultimately incorporated into the New Deal less than a decade later. So people who feel ignored or who believe that important issues are being ignored by the two political parties have a way of getting the parties to change and by voting in droves for a third party. As I recall, the Progressives at their peak in the 1920s got more than 20% of the vote. That was a significant insurgency.

That is an avenue of change, but it's not an avenue of victory unless you count long-term victory for your ideas as a victory, which I believe you should.

Phil Bredesen: You've made the point, which I think is excellent, that proportional representation would almost assuredly give you third parties. It's a structural change that opens the door to it. There's a lot of experimenting and discussion going on in the country right now about rank choice voting and being tried in some places. Does that in your mind, open up the third party Pandora box?

Bill Galston: It could lead to the victory of third party candidates in some circumstances. I mean, heck, we're such a diverse country, 435 congressional districts. There's bound to be a district somewhere where the application of rank choice voting would produce that result. What it seems more likely to do is what it seems already to have done in Alaska, and that is to empower the more moderate candidates of the existing two parties. Now, I happen to think that's a pretty good outcome, which is why I'm prepared to support rank choice voting not as a silver bullet, but as an important addition to the electoral armory. But I don't think that that is the door that will open the way to a big third party movement in this country.

Let me add something else. We're talking about third party in the singular, but some colleagues and I have actually done some research about who the people are who are most dissatisfied with the two-party system as it now stands. You might think, well, these are all people in the middle who are just looking for a centrist alternative. It's much more complicated than that. In fact, they're all over the map. There are lots of people who want a party to the left of the existing Democratic Party. There are a lot of people, not as many, but still a lot, who'd like a party that's more purely conservative in one sense or another than the existing Republican Party. And yes, then there are those people in the middle.

So if you open the door to a multi-party system, the evidence suggests that you wouldn't get three, you'd get more like six, and you'd have a system that looks a lot more like today's Europe, where you have a far left party, a traditional Social Democratic Party, a party of the center like the Liberals in Germany, let's call it the Michael Bloomberg Party. You'd have a traditional center left party. Then you'd have a populist nationalist party. In many European countries, John Kasich and Donald Trump would not be members of the same political party. Alexandria

Ocasio-Cortez, not my favorite politician, said something arresting and true a couple of years ago when she said that "in Europe, President Biden and I would not be members of the same political party." That's right. They wouldn't be.

So our two political parties are internal coalitions of what would be different parties in Europe. So it's not that we don't have a multi-party system. It's instead of multi-parties, we have multiple factions organized into two political parties.

Bill Haslam: Yeah, interesting point. Although I did notice AOC's comms director just went to work for Biden as his comms director for the campaign. So maybe within that system, people have found a way to move.

Bill Galston: In our two party system, each party is a ramshackle coalition.

Bill Haslam: Good word, good word.

Bill Galston: So it's a constant process of coalition management, which is more like someone in the circus who's trying to juggle and whistle at the same time. It's not easy. Joe Biden became president by very deliberately working to overcome the splits that had developed within the Democratic Party after the Sanders insurgency of 2016. He decided that the path to victory was through party unity. That turned out to be absolutely correct, but in order to get party unity, you have to get in bed with people that you wouldn't ordinarily sleep with.

Bill Haslam: Bill, you were one of the founders of the No Labels group, which is getting a lot of attention right now because of the possibility of the No Labels, because they're getting on ballots across the country and the possibility of No Labels having a candidate for president this year in 2024. You went from being one of the founders to I think leaving the group. Tell us why you helped start that and then why you left.

Bill Galston: Well, the original mission, I did help start it, and the original mission of No Labels was to enhance real opportunities for cooperation across party lines within the Congress of the United States, and we worked for a decade very successfully to do that, including founding what is now the largest independent bipartisan caucus in the House of Representative, the Problem Solvers. And I thought that was an excellent mission, a necessary mission. I was proud to support it.

When conversation began about a third-party or independent presidential alternative in 2024, I said, "Wait a minute. Not only isn't this what I signed up for, but I think it's an affirmatively bad idea," and I laid out my reasons. I spent about a year internally advocating against the idea, trying to argue that it was unrealistic at best and dangerous at worst. When it became clear to me that my argument was going nowhere, I thought that my only honorable course was to withdraw and to say why, and I did.

Phil Bredesen: This podcast takes its name from Senator Baker's quote about listening,

keeping an open mind, just to remember that the other person might be right. I'm kind of curious with your extensive background and the long time that you've spent studying with and being in the kitchen on these issues, if you have some examples from your own life of times when you suddenly realized the other fellow was right about something and some opinion you had was altered by something another party said. Do you have one of those?

Bill Galston: Oh gosh, that happens all the time, right? I've spent many, many years working on the immigration issue and I was always in favor of comprehensive immigration reform, doing everything at once. I still think that would've been the right thing to do 10 years ago. I continue to lament that a bill, an immigration reform bill that passed the Senate with all 54 Democrats and more than a third of the Republican senators in support spearheaded by Marco Rubio and a couple of others, I still lament that that bill, which was passed with a veto-proof majority in the Senate was never allowed to come to the floor of the House of Representatives. And we can have a long debate as to why that was. The man to talk to about that is John Boehner.

But the long and the short of it is that I've changed my mind about the sequencing of events. I now believe, and I guess a lot of people are coming to believe, that in current circumstances we have to do something about the border first, and if we don't do that, not much else is going to happen on the immigration front. That's a big shift, right?

And is it that I believe that the comprehensive approach was a bad idea when it seemed to be riding high? No, I think it was the right idea, but times have changed and I now also understand more clearly the emotional resonance of the border issue to people whom I haven't agreed with in the past.

Bill Haslam: Thank you. We really appreciate it, enjoyed the conversation.

Bill Galston: Good to be with you.

Phil Bredesen: What do you think?

Bill Haslam: I mean, I think the consistent message from these two guests is the idea of a third-party candidate being viable doesn't feel realistic. Do you agree with that view?

Phil Bredesen: I do. I mean, I think I came to see it more in terms of better understanding, first of all, the difficulties, not just legal, but just political and realistic difficulties in having that happen. I certainly think the idea that each of the parties we have is in fact an assembly of sub political parties.

Bill Haslam: Great point. Yeah.

Phil Bredesen: That seems to me to be a healthy situation. Some of the things that were talked about earlier about changing the power structure in the parties as to where they're powerful and where they're not are pretty intriguing to me, and I think are going to bear a lot of thought.

Bill Haslam: I think that might be right. I still am just fundamentally concerned when pretty decided majority of the country says we don't like the choice that we have or appears we're going to have in this upcoming presidential election. My fear is that people just become more and more disengaged from the process, and you have a few of the people who are the most vocal on either side become to dominate the process. And I'm just concerned about where that leaves us.

Phil Bredesen: The point that Bill made that if you did have an opening for additional parties, you probably would've six or seven of them that it's not some uniform group of disenfranchised for people who feel disenfranchised.

Bill Haslam: That was a good point. Well, we will keep talking and looking for the answers toward better and more effective governing towards a more perfect union.

Phil Bredesen: And as soon as we get it figured out, we'll be sure to tell everyone.

Bill Haslam: Should have it by noon today. Thanks.

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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