

You Might Be Right - Phil & Bill Answer Your Questions - Transcript

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Two years and 200,000 downloads later "You Might Be Right" has inspired listeners across the country. In recognition of this milestone we invited some of our most avid listeners to participate in an episode asking governors Bredesen and Haslam questions about the podcast, about their time in office or current hot topics. To submit a question for consideration in a future episode, please email youmightberight@utk.edu.

Bill Haslam: Well, Phil, welcome back. It's good to see you.

Phil Bredesen: It's great to be back again and another interesting day.

Bill Haslam: I think we have a different format. Today we thought rather than us interviewing guests and then trying to come to some conclusion, evidently we have a few guests that would like to turn the table and ask us a few questions.

Phil Bredesen: Oh, I don't know if I like that or not. It's-

Bill Haslam: Seriously. It'd be like when you're a governor and you had press conference, you only called on the people you wanted to call on, but I guess we'll take all comers.

Phil Bredesen: I guess we'll have to do it, but actually, it seriously should be really interesting, and interesting to hear what people are thinking about.

Bill Haslam: Let's hear.

Judy from Nashville: Hi, Governor Bredesen and Governor Haslam. This is Judy from Nashville and thank you so much for doing this. My question is how do you keep your cool when discussing an existential issue like climate change and you feel like the other side is courting disaster? This is what keeps me from bringing the subject up when I really know we should be talking about it. Thank you so much and I look forward to hearing your answers.

Phil Bredesen: I think that if you've, in the process of running for governor and being governor, you get a little clinical about these things, you can isolate yourself a little bit from the issues because you just have to, by the nature of it, talk with and deal with people who come from very different kinds of worldviews. I think of a little bit like being a doctor. It's like you have to listen to everybody's issues and understand they come from different places and be respectful of that in the Howard Baker tradition.

Bill Haslam: I do think your question is a good one. I think one of the negative impacts of our current environment is we're afraid to talk about hard things because we realize how passionate and how strong the feelings are. Listen, I'm preaching to myself as I say this, but one of the things I try to do is to start with a, "Tell me how you feel about X and why you feel that way." And give them a chance to validate why they feel that way and then start the discussion. But I do think there are certain issues that are just too important for us not to talk about that we have totally quit talking about.

Phil Bredeesen: Yeah, I think the important thing though, Bill, is just to recognize that people's worlds might be very different from your own in terms of what's important to them and how they see things and just trying to do. You know what? This whole podcast has been about trying to follow in the footsteps of Howard Baker of listening to the other person and just trying to understand why they feel that way and what about their world is different I think is really, that empathy is really important.

Bill Haslam: Agree. Next question.

Joe from Hermitage: Hello, Governors. This is Joe from Hermitage, Tennessee. My question is can a person, a Tennessean with a serving heart but not a lot of money in their pocketbook, become governor? And if not, why not?

Bill Haslam: All right, I feel like that might be a little bit of a pointed question. Our last three governors we've elected in Tennessee, including the two of us, have been business people that came into the race as people of means, if you will. But my answer is absolutely. Tennessee's a little bit of an anomaly in that, and like I said, you could cite the last three elections, but that it's actually not true. If you look at our Senate elections, it's not true. If you look at governor elections around the country. I would argue historically, again, if you look across the country, when the candidate who comes in with some of their own money, so to speak, I think doesn't win as often as they do. Do you have a perspective, Phil?

Phil Bredeesen: No, I think you're right about that. I mean, I was able to get started in politics because I was able to put some money in the first campaigns. And my record is every campaign that I've funded basically by myself, I've lost. And every one that I've went out and raised money, have won. I actually think the process of engaging with trying to raise money is an important part of the political process.

But no, I absolutely think it's possible to do it from different perspectives. Obviously if you're going to take the time it takes to run for governor and so on, you need to have some kind of economic stability. I mean, you can't be living paycheck to paycheck to be able to do that. And I think sometimes people look at someone's at least financial stability as an evidence of other kinds of characteristics. But I think the answer is that the world is wide open to people who are not of means and, really, anyone who can identify an issue or a strain or a point of view that people can respond to and resonate with.

Bill Haslam: Yeah. I'll go back just to the political question too that you brought up. When I ran for governor 2010, we made a pointed effort to raise as much money from as many different people as we can so that over 80% of the money we raised, I think is 85, was actually donated by their folks. That actually has a political advantage, right?

Phil Bredeesen: No question.

Bill Haslam: Because whether it's \$10 or \$100 or the campaign max, once people have invested, they're invested. And by the way, some of those folks are people that I benefited greatly, not because they gave to the campaign, but I got to know them and then they introduced me to their friends. And once they're bought in, they continue to.

Phil Bredeesen: Now when I ran for governor both times we had very active efforts to try to get a lot of small dollar donations. The idea being it's not a huge amount of money you raise that way, but somebody who gives you \$10 is committed to you in a way that they're just not otherwise. And I think from their perspective, they feel good about having participated in a campaign in that fashion. It works both ways.

Bill Haslam: Let's move on to the next question before people think we're overly defensive.

Phil Bredeesen: Are we done yet?

Carol from Knoxville: Hello, Governors. This is Carol from Knoxville. I would like to know how do you choose the topics and guests for the podcast? Are there any topics you've avoided because they're too controversial? Thanks.

Phil Bredeesen: Well, I guess you and I, we've sat down and tried to have, particularly in these later seasons, some overarching theme for what it was we were trying to do. And identify some areas where we think there's an axis that you can discuss and then try to find some people to do that. It's a messy process, but I think we've had some good topics people have responded to.

Bill Haslam: I think that. The original premise was let's take a hard issue, whether it be immigration or gun rights or whatever it is, and try to explain the other side. So that, as one of our earlier questioners asked about climate change, how do you even talk about hard stuff? You can at least let people know, "Well, there is another side to a story." And so that was the original premise. We've tried to do that.

Sometimes, to be honest with you, our challenge, I think, is to find guests who can be entertaining and informative without being overly argumentative, which is kind of the point of the show. And I think that's what we try to get as guests that know what they're talking about, but can explain it in a thoughtful way, not in a cable news after nine o'clock shouting at the other side way.

Phil Bredeesen: Yeah. And I think that in doing that, just as you say, Bill, we're trying to avoid

people who, I mean just have some fixed speech about the subject and look instead for someone who's got a sophisticated viewpoint and can make good arguments. It's a little bit like a debate in school you might have done, too, which is both sides need to prepare thoughtful arguments and we're looking for people who can make those.

Bill Haslam: I think I'll go back to one of the things that I think persuaded both of us to do this is when you're in office you realize that most arguments have another side to them. As a friend of mine used to say, "Even a pancake has two sides." And when you're the one making that last decision, then it's imperative that you at the very least understand the other side's arguments. And that's what we're trying to do.

Phil Bredesen: Who's up next?

Bill Haslam: Let's see.

Brenda from Lynnville: Hello, Governors Bredesen and Haslam. This is Brenda from Lynnville, Tennessee. And I've been a fan of your podcast since its beginning. And here is my question, does a super majority, regardless of party, have the potential to harm the rights of the citizens of that state? Thank you.

Bill Haslam: Well, I'll go first since it's my party that's had the super majority here for a few years. And one interesting footnote. I'm the first Republican governor in history to have a Republican majority in the legislature. So what you see in Tennessee now is a fairly recent phenomena. But I think I'll answer her question the best I can. I do think democracy depends on a certain level of friction that I think our constitution assumes that there's going to be some argument back and forth and even some compromise. And when you can't have that effective argument, I think it turns into one side arguing against the other side of its own team. And I'm not certain that's as effective as it should be.

Phil Bredesen: Yeah, I think, Brenda, I think the answer is yes. It really is bad that I think it's okay for either party to be in the majority. As long as you've got a vigorous opposition party and you have discussions about these things, I think you get better answers to questions that way.

Bill Haslam: Let's see what our next guest wants to ask us.

Voter from Knoxville: I am a voter from Knoxville. My question is, when you vote for a political candidate, do you vote for your political party's candidate automatically as the number one consideration or do you look at a candidate's values, integrity and honesty? What is your main criteria a candidate needs to earn your vote? Thank you.

Phil Bredesen: I think for me it depends on the race. I mean there are minor races in which assuming both candidates are reasonable people and not crooks and not crazy and so on, I mean my inclination is to vote for the Democratic candidate. I'm a member of that party. When you get further up the ladder for something like president, I think it's a much different equation.

For me, it's not about issues. That may be a terrible thing to say. It's more about a sense of how do you think this person will respond to the unexpected. When you think of any presidency in my lifetime, the things that that presidency is known for or washed up on the rocks on are not things that were ever part of an election. They were just— Think about COVID. I mean something that just rose out of it. In my mind it's about the ability of the candidate at those levels to respond to novel situations and think things through is what I'm really looking for more than a specific ideology.

Bill Haslam: Yeah, like I said, I'm a Republican because I believe things that Republicans have historically believed in. From there, I actually agree with Phil's answer. Some of that depends on the election, but here's what I ultimately look for and maybe it's what you were saying when it doesn't start as much with the issues. Here's what I look for is does that person have a history of solving problems? That's what we elect people to do is to help us manage whatever the entity is, a city, a state, a country, but then to solve issues that come up. And to your point, nobody knows what that issue is going to be. I mean for George W. Bush, it was the 9/11 and the aftermath with the wars in the Middle East. It was COVID. We can think back to a lot of historic examples.

What I always say is, "What's the person's resume look like in terms of solving problems?" Unfortunately, we're electing people based on rhetoric today. And I always had folks kind of mad at me, like "You don't get up and yell enough." Well, when I go to hire somebody for any other job, I don't hire them based on how well they yell. I hire them based on have they ever solved problems in the past and do I think they can solve the problems needed in this job?

Phil Bredeesen: Yeah. I think we're saying much the same kind of thing. I mean, I would agree with you that someone's past history of being able to deal with and solve problems, whether it be in business or politics or nonprofit or anything else is a very good indicator of how successfully they might do it in the future. And it'd certainly be one of the important things I'd look for just like you're saying.

What else do we have today?

Ellen from Knoxville: Hi, Governors. This is Ellen from Knoxville. Here's my question. What do you consider the most important policies lawmakers should pass and what are the most important practices educators should adopt in order to improve K-12 public education, especially for students historically disadvantaged by geography or poverty? Thank you.

Phil Bredeesen: I think that the most important thing, I come at education from the standpoint of it really is all about the teachers. I mean school boards and superintendents and governors and legislators are all fine, but education happens when you close the door of the classroom and there's a teacher in there with the students.

From my mind, it's just figuring out how you get the best people into teaching, that you give them the tools that they need to teach, that you find out ways to support them and manage them

and that manage that human capital is what it's all about. I particularly don't like things that are blaming teachers for some of the shortcomings in education.

My experience has been most of them are people who are very dedicated to trying to figure out how to help the students. I just think that focusing on teachers as being the number one, two and three most important things in that process and what do you do to manage that human capital in the best possible way is what this is all about.

Bill Haslam: I agree. I guess I'd start with, and this is actually something I got from you when I was first thinking about running for governor. I think it starts with raising our expectations and really across the board. And our questioner asked about students from disadvantaged or low income backgrounds to not say, "Well, those kids can't learn." That when we say all here we mean all. And we have to really, really mean that and not say, "Well, that school is traditionally performed low and we shouldn't expect more." I just think that's dead wrong.

I think it's about raising expectations. I do think, like you said, it's about the teacher in the classroom. I personally feel like we need to have some way to evaluate how that teacher's doing. I don't think we should put their whole compensation based on that. But we need to have a way to measure, have students learned or not? And I know a lot of people feel like we're over testing, but we have to have a scoreboard of sorts to know what does that child learn during that year. And then we have to have some way that that feedback gets back to teachers.

Phil Bredesen: I think that expectations thing is so important. I think it's something both of us worked very hard on in our time as governor. I remember back when I was mayor trying to put in place some standards in the Metro school system. And after a meeting on that subject with some teachers in the public, I had somebody come up to me and say, "Well, you can't possibly hold kids from these disadvantaged backgrounds to the same expectations you have for someone else." I remember being just horrified by the comment.

It was like, "If you really want to damage that kid, I can't think of a better way to do it." That you need to start out, I think, with the assumption that all of these kids have got God-given abilities that you need to find out how to make the best possible use of them. And that you certainly shouldn't be shut out from accessing the best of what education has to offer because of your background or how you grew up. I think that setting high expectations and helping the teachers to achieve that is really the fundamental thing that we have to do.

Bill Haslam: Yeah. I do want to circle back to one of the point you started with. No matter where you are on the education debate spectrum, teachers are not the enemy here. Okay. These are folks who have kind of said, "This is what I'm going to do with my life." And they're getting paid what I'd call below market wages to do it. And it's I think the other thing that's once you spend time in school you realize that every day, that child, that school door, the children that walk through bring all of society's problems with them. And we're expecting our schools to fix them, the places where families have dropped the ball. And so we got to have, we have to be realistic about what that environment is like and not think, "Well, the teachers aren't doing their

job." But think about how do we put the support systems in place, the trellis for the vines to grow on, so to speak, that will allow those students and the teachers to succeed?

Phil Bredeesen: Yeah, well said. Well said.

Bob from Oak Ridge: Hello. This is Bob from Oak Ridge. I value your perspectives on this question. What steps can we take to better prepare students for the workforce? Are there better ways to increase business partnerships with schools, community and vocational colleges and universities to provide students with meaningful careers and meet our employer needs? Thank you.

Bill Haslam: I'll take a first swing and then I'd love to hear your thoughts on this, too, Phil. I think it's one of the things that happened between you being in office and me being in office is you really started the ball rolling on, like I said, raising expectations, raising the standards of what we expect. And then we picked up on that and then continue with this idea of like, "Well, what if we could have free community college for everybody?" All of a sudden now families weren't talking about if they would go to college, it's where they would go to college.

But we realized in there that access did not mean success and preparing students for whatever post-secondary, whether it be a four-year school or a trade school, whatever it is, we weren't doing anybody a favor by not preparing them for that. Then beyond that was the next step that we were starting to work on when time ran out, but how do we tie that into whatever the job market looks like?

And I don't know that we've done a great job of helping, listening to businesses say, "Here's what we need going forward." And so, if you think about how the world changed over the last 30 years and it became more technical in nature, more things were automated and we had to compete with the whole world in a way that we didn't before. I don't think we prepared our students for that world. And part of that was we weren't listening to businesses saying, "I no longer need this person who's going to stand on a production line and turn one widget two notches. I need this kind of ability." And I think it's one of the reasons that a lot of people felt left behind.

Phil Bredeesen: Yeah, I agree with what you said. And I think that one of the things which has helped is that between the two of us, there was some continuity. I mean, I was doing things that I was talking with Republicans about, including yourself, to be acceptable. And then when it came your turn, it wasn't, "Well, everything my predecessor did was wrong and here's what we're going to do." It was a, "I need to change this and add this," and so on, but you keep going. And I think that kind of continuity is really important in moving the school systems to where they need to be.

I also think I'd add that there are so many opportunities out there that don't require post-secondary education particularly. And I think schools can do a better job of preparing people for those kinds of jobs. I mean, someone who's very good in construction trades, for example, can

earn a very good living these days without having to have that extra.

The other thing I would say in preparing people for the workplace is, I guess in my experience and probably more was as mayor, when people have trouble in the workplace, it often is soft skills, not the hard kinds of things. And in my particular case, I worked in a drugstore from when I was I guess a sophomore in high school on. And that in some ways might've been the most important work experience of my life. I mean you just learn basic things like you got to get up and go to work and you got to work these days. And some days your boss is a jerk and what do you do about it? And then all those kinds of things.

And I would think say to businesses, look, if you can provide opportunities, even stretch a little bit for students to have real jobs, not educational training, these kinds of things that get federal support. Just a real job for the summer, I think that can really help prepare kids for much more success in the workplace when their time really comes to have to support a family.

Bill Haslam: Well said. All right. Who we got next?

Caller: Do you recommend we try to improve the current primary based election system? If so, why and how?

Phil Bredeesen: Well, I think the primary system we have now has a substantial responsibility for the kind of polarization that we have. So few people voting in primaries and so who gets chosen tends to be driven by a relatively small vocal minority on both sides of the aisle. I don't know the answer. I am certainly watching with interest these ranked voting systems as a way of possibly getting beyond that. But some way to be putting up candidates who are more representative of the mainstream, just their party, Republican or Democratic parties, I think is going to be essential if we're going to start moving away from this polarization we have.

Bill Haslam: I think the other idea I would suggest, and this is hard to do because wherever you are, the current elected people have benefited from the system the way it is, but I think there should be some independent party that sets districts. It is way too easy now to draw lines the way that you want them to. And I think I hear Republicans complain about that in Democrat states and Democrats complain about that in Republican states. If we could somehow, and I don't know the way to do this, but back up and say, "Let's have some independent commission's going to come in, divide up, whether it be state legislative lines or U.S. House seats, divide those up in an impartial way," I think that would help.

Phil Bredeesen: I'd be curious, would you do that along the lines of common interests, like urban versus rural and suburban or would you do it along the lines of trying to make them all competitive districts that would swing?

Bill Haslam: Well, I don't think you could do it trying to make them competitive districts. I think you just do it in some sort of non-prejudiced way. I mean now it's pretty easy to say, "Well, that's a pretty heavy Republican area. We're going to put a little curlicue on the district there and add

it to that." I don't think you could design it strictly by making it competitive. I'd just say it's a, if we were going to divide up this state and look at where people live and we have eight congressional districts, here's the most fair way to divide that.

And I don't know that I probably would not do it by, "Well, I want to make this an urban district and not a rural district." I actually think legislators are best when they have to consider multiple constituencies. When it's like, "All my folks think this way," then it's just really easy to go be their legislator, but maybe not as easy to think through the bigger issues.

Phil Bredeesen: Interesting. Yeah.

We're getting to the end of our time here. Do we have a last question?

Bill Haslam: I think we do.

Dennis from East Tennessee: This is Dennis from East Tennessee. How best should I communicate with my members of the legislature such that I feel like I'm being heard?

Phil Bredeesen: I guess what I would say to that is I've never been a member of the legislature, but I think it's probably the same process in talking to a mayor or a governor. I would just say, I always say to people, "Look, be constructive and helpful. If what you're trying to do is just pressure me, 'I'm going to raise votes against you if you don't do this.' I mean that's not particularly persuasive or helpful. And I feel like it's treating me as this simpleton who just is going to do whatever they think is in their personal best interest at any given instant, which I don't think I am." But someone who came forward with some thoughtful reasons why this course of action makes sense, I think has the possibility of driving your decisions and changing your mind about things. And in the spirit of Howard Baker, the other fellow might be right. And listening to someone who has marshaled some reasonable arguments I think can be very persuasive.

Bill Haslam: Yeah, I can promise you that legislators do respond to their voters' desires. I've seen it happen where people would— Even, heck, when I was governor, they'd come in and say, "Okay, yeah, I agree with you on this." And then they might go back home to their district, come back and say, "I'm sorry. It's just not what my folks have persuaded me otherwise." I can say that.

I think the harder question, I don't mean to try to read our questioner's mind, but is what do you do if you're not of the same party in a district that's heavily the other party? I think that is a little harder. I still think this. I think a thoughtful approach of explaining why you feel that way, not the kind of pressure, "If you don't do this, then we're going to do whatever," I do think can still make a difference. I do think that.

Phil Bredeesen: And this may go a little bit beyond the question, but I get asked a lot of times by people who have an interest in some issue about talking to legislators who are not their legislators, but they go up to Capitol Hill and talk to legislators. And I sure always make the point

to them that any of these legislators are going to be inherently very responsive to the feelings in their district. All of the arguments you can make in the world are meaningless if those arguments don't resonate in any way in the district, that try to understand who the people are this person is representing and how they might feel about these issues. And keep that in mind as you have the conversation is really vital.

Bill Haslam: My last thought is this. My dad used to always tell me, "Just because you get your say doesn't mean you get your way." And just remember there's going to be times when you can make a very persuasive argument, but you won't change that legislator's mind. And he or she has a lot of constituents. I remember as governor, we have almost 7 million Tennesseans. And I would try to softly persuade folks, "I know you feel really strongly about that, but I can promise you everybody doesn't feel that way." And like I said, you just have to remember, I hope you get your say, that doesn't mean you'll get your way.

Phil Bredesen: Sounds like maybe you were a difficult teenager.

Bill Haslam: Or maybe my dad just didn't think my-

Phil Bredesen: Your dad was willing to listen, but not necessarily agree with you.

Bill Haslam: Yeah. Yeah, maybe my opinions just weren't all that valid.

Phil Bredesen: This has been interesting. We should do some more of this.

Bill Haslam: It works for me. And actually, I do want to encourage our listeners, too, when you have questions or thoughts or suggestions, let us know. I mean, we're doing this hopefully to add to the discussion in a way that's helpful as a country as we wrestle with these huge issues.

Phil Bredesen: Well, it's been an enjoyable session and I look forward to our next meeting.

Bill Haslam: 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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