

Kyle Kondik Q&A – What Happens Next

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Larry Bernstein:

The Chicago and near suburbs are very blue, and elsewhere in the state is very red. And the voters in the red region can't believe they have little to no representation in the congressional delegations. Now under Governor Pritzker's 2020 Illinois redistricting plan, the Democrats will gerrymander down state eliminating many of the Republican seats.

The redistricting uses the latest technology going neighborhood by neighborhood to get just enough Democratic votes to knock out the Republican congressman. Will downstate Republicans revolt because they are denied representation?

Kyle Kondik:

Illinois is a great example of a state that's been gerrymandered by Democrats. And New York. Then you also have Republican gerrymanders in places like Texas, North Carolina, Ohio and Florida.

Some of these states is that statewide ballot measures to enact some prohibition on gerrymandering. And Democrats have proposed trying to do that at a federal level. The Democratic voting bill would set standards in place that would knock out districts that went off course.

If you're a Republican in Illinois or a Democrat in Texas, you probably feel like the deck is stacked against you.

You mentioned Illinois, there's one that goes from east St. Louis all the way to Champaign-Urbana.

It's just this snake that (laughs), picks up as many Democratic areas to create a Democratic leaning seat. Both sides end up doing it. In recent decades, Republicans have had more power to do it than Democrats have. And that's why Democrats have been more interested in federal guidelines for redistricting.

Larry Bernstein:

Let's use Staten Island as an example.

Kyle Kondik:

Staten Island itself is not big enough to have a single House member, so it has to be connected to the rest of New York City. And under the current map, it's connected to places like Bay Ridge and conservative leaning parts of Brooklyn. And then this map connects it instead to Park Slope that are Democratic.

Of the 40 most densely populated districts, the only one held by a Republican was New York 11, which is the Staten Island seat. You have this conservative, Republican bastion in the midst of an otherwise very

Democratic area, although given that there are Republican pockets in Brooklyn, it would be possible to draw a Republican seat.

New York voters did create an independent redistricting commission. Clearly the commission wasn't strong enough, so it was essentially sabotaged, Democrats didn't play ball. The Democrats in the state legislature, they now have two-thirds majorities in the state House and the state senate. So, they were able to pass their own plan.

Democrats for the first time in modern history had unified power in New York and they're using it. And the state constitution in New York suggests some prohibitions on having districts that are not that compact. The Republicans could win a court case on this although the Democrats control the court.

There's a similar situation going on in Florida where the shoe is on the other foot, that the Republicans are trying to gerrymander, there are prohibitions against gerrymandering written into the state constitution, but the court is very conservative.

Larry Bernstein:

Is there any advantage or bias that favors one of the political parties for US House races? Biden won the presidential popular vote by four percentage points, and voters no longer split tickets. So, why don't we see a larger Democratic majority in the House?

Biden voters are highly concentrated in particular states like California, Massachusetts, New York and Illinois. and the Republican voters are more diffuse is that critical?

Kyle Kondik:

Population density are a disadvantage for Democrats in the House. There's a really good book by Jonathan Rodden called Why Cities Lose. And he doesn't believe that the Democrats are a natural geographic disadvantage everywhere but in some of the old industrial states like Pennsylvania, Ohio and Michigan. Even if you were drawing a fair map, Republicans would still have an advantage because of concentration of Democratic voters in urban areas.

There are significantly more landslide Democratic presidential districts, places where Joe Biden got 80 or 90% of the vote.

Now, if you're a Democrat, you could gerrymander those places and then extend them out to surrounding areas to try to make more Democratic seats. That's effectively what Democrats have tried to do in Illinois.

Biden won the national popular vote like 4.5 points. The median House seat if you just rank all the districts, Biden won by about two points. So, the median house seat is about two points to the right of the nation.

Larry Bernstein:

Moving on, the 1965 Voting Rights Act concentrated African American and Hispanic voters in these districts supercharged for the Democrats. And the Black caucus was very happy to get these African American Congressmen, but on the national level it hurts Democrats, because they couldn't combine the African American voters with the suburbs to create slim Democratic majorities.

And then in 2010, in Illinois for the first time since 1965, the Democrats decided to reapportion some of those African Americans into the suburbs to flip suburban districts. Does the Voting Rights Act advantage the Republicans? Do you think the Democrats will undercut the Voting Rights Act to end African American Congressional representation to win more House seats? And do you think the Black Caucus will agree to it?

Kyle Kondik:

The Voting Rights Act was changed in the early 1980 that made more majority minority districts. In the '90s, Democrats still had a lot of control of State governments. but George HW Bush was President, and the justice department decided to use its power to give pre-clearance to maps, particularly in the South.

That doesn't really exist anymore based on subsequent Supreme Court decisions. But back then, the Justice Department said that you have to draw more majority minority districts based on the Voting Rights Act.

That had the effect of creating more districts that elected Black and Latino members. That ended up bleaching the districts in the South where it contributed to Republican seat flips.

Democrats back 30 years ago, "you need to elect a non-white member from a district, you need to have a majority non-white population." I don't think that's really true right now.

The Trump driven realignment: small town areas got much more Republican, but a lot of suburban places got much more Democratic, and that allowed the Democrats to achieve their goal in Illinois.

Larry Bernstein:

Split tickets. When I was growing up, people would say that they were independent, voted for the person, and split tickets. Does that exist anymore?

I recently perused the Almanac of American politics that details each of the 435 Congressional Districts, and I was surprised how the voting patterns for the House and President were virtually identical.

Kyle Kondik:

Gary Jacobsen is one of the great congressional scholars, and he said that this was the strongest correlation between Presidential and House results since 1952.

There were nine districts that Biden won, but a Republican won for House, and there were seven districts that a Democrat won, but Trump won and the differences are pretty minute.

If you ask people their party ID, 35% say independent, 35% say Democratic, 30% say Republican. Gallup, will ask people their leaned party identification, and 90% plus lean to one party.

Independents are lying to people- (laughs) or lying to themselves, because they generally do have a strong preference.

If you go back to the '60s and '70s, Lyndon Johnson winning effectively 60/40 in 1964, and then eight years later, Nixon winning 60/40. That's a lot of people changing their votes over time. Whereas now, Barack Obama winning by seven points in 2008 is a landslide. And all the elections since 2000 have been closer than that. So you don't have as many people changing their minds.

In suburban districts, places used to be pretty Republican, a lot of those places are becoming more Democratic, but the Democrats are kind of hollowing out in some old industrial centers, and small towns and medium-sized cities, places like Youngstown, and Warren Ohio, or in Wisconsin and Minnesota, outside the big urban areas.

Tom Davis who's a former Republican Congressman from Virginia has this saying that American voters have become parliamentary that they are voting for the party as opposed to the individual member. The value of incumbency is far reduced, there's less ticket splitting, and that probably means you've got a fairly well-ordered set of policy priorities to vote a straight ticket.

People digest politics more through a national lens, and that's led to nationalized voting patterns. Newt Gingrich, who I think is a really important figure, when he was toiling away in the minority, one of the things he really wanted to do was get these Republican voting presidential districts to vote for Republicans for the House.

All these different factors that have nationalized politics and contributed to this lack of ticket splitting.

Larry Bernstein:

New Jersey voted for Biden over Trump by 16 points. And in the November 2021 Governor's race, the Democrat won by only one percent. And then down ticket, the State Senate President lost to an unknown candidate that spent \$1500 bucks on his entire campaign. What happened in New Jersey?

Kyle Kondik:

The Presidential election year is different than the off-year elections. It's very common for the Presidential Party that holds the White House to struggle in these elections.

A party wins a majority with the Presidential election, then they end up losing it two years later with this midterm backlash. The non-presidential party is more motivated, there are also swing voters who are upset for different reasons. Biden's numbers were bad.

If you look in New Jersey, who came out to vote, and who didn't. It was a combination of Republicans had disproportionately good turnout, and folks who voted for Biden switched to voting Republican for Governor.

There are more crossover party Governors, Maryland and Virginia have Republican Governors as does Vermont and Massachusetts, those are all blue states. Virginia is still a blue leaning state, despite Republicans won these most recent state-wide elections.

Republicans did 11 points better than they had done in 2017 in both Governor's races. 2017 was a great Democratic environment, 2021 was a great Republican environment. 2022 is shaping up to be a good Republican environment nationally, although we've still got a lot of time until the midterm.

Larry Bernstein:

Larry Bartels, a Vanderbilt Professor espouses the idea that when you switch political parties, you adopt the views of your new party. The best example Bartels gives are Republicans who switched parties in 1974 because of Watergate, also changed their view on abortion. Why do your political views change when you switch political parties?

Kyle Kondik:

Leaders of the party help set what people actually care about and believe in politics. It also shows that people's political views can be malleable.

The Democrats are trying to pass this build back better package that has a number of different things in it. You can poll on those individual issues and often find a lot of support for them, but that doesn't necessarily mean that those people want the government to prioritize it.

Biden's problem is that they're not seen as focusing on COVID or inflation. So, there's a disconnect there.

Larry Bernstein:

Let's compare realignment in two House Congressional Districts. The first is the Illinois 10th District which includes Glencoe where I grew up versus the Ohio 13th which includes Youngstown. Illinois 10 includes the wealthiest suburbs in the Midwest and is trending Democratic. When I was a boy, Donald Rumsfeld represented this district and until Trump used to switch back and forth between parties every two years. Ohio 13 is a working-class community that was historically Democratic and is now trending Republican, what is going on here?

Kyle Kondik:

It's a great question and you picked two good districts because I look at the percentage of four-year college attainment? And Illinois 10 is very high. Ohio 13, which is Youngstown Warren district, Obama won by 25 and Biden only won it by three points.

In the Illinois district, four-year college retainment is really high. In the Ohio district, four-year college retainment is pretty low. If you have a combination of substantial non-white population and a highly educated population, those districts zoom toward the Democrats in recent years and white working-class districts have zoomed toward the Republicans in Trump years.

Larry Bernstein:

I am looking at my Almanac for American Politics; in the Illinois 10, 56% are college or post graduates but in Ohio 13 its only 24%.

One of the interesting tidbits I learned from reading your book Long Thread was about Texas in the 1960s. And the stat that shocked me, the 1962 Texas congressional delegation had 24 Democrats and zero Republicans. 24 to zero. How could Texas be that lopsided? I thought that the Republicans were players in Texas in the 1960s.

Kyle Kondik:

It's more accurate to say it was a conservative not necessarily Republican, although, Kennedy barely won Texas in 1960.

Larry Bernstein:

Was there substantial voter fraud in Texas in 1960?

Kyle Kondik:

If you read the Robert Caro Lyndon Johnson books, there's pretty good evidence that there was fraud in South Texas that maybe that allowed Johnson to win the Senate and also Kennedy in 1960.

Texas was effectively a one-party state. The Democratic delegation was filled with some of the most conservative members of the House. But over time, those conservative Democrats died off, became Republicans, and the party got more ideologically cohesive over time.

Larry Bernstein:

After the 1960 Presidential Election, Nixon was informed of the election irregularities in Texas and Illinois but he chose not to escalate the matter. Why has this political norm changed?

Biden mentioned in his recent press conference that he expects to see massive election fraud in the next midterms.

How does challenging elections and voter fraud impact turnout?

Kyle Kondik:

I think anger can be a motivator. The lead up to the Georgia runoffs had the effect of giving the Democrats a little bit of a turnout advantage in that election. However, the Virginia election that the Republicans feelings that the election was stolen and anger being a great motivator.

Voter fraud in elections about Johnson in Texas, I do think our elections are a lot cleaner than they were back then. It's not wrong for a candidate to allege if they've got some evidence that there was a problem. I don't think that Trump has really produced good evidence in favor of his allegations. North Carolina, there was a house race in 2018 where there was sufficient suggestion that there was fraud, that they actually did a do over election. The Republicans very narrowly won both times.

Larry Bernstein:

What do you think partisan turnout will be in the Midterms?

Kyle Kondik:

Republicans have a turnout advantage in these kinds of elections.

There also is some broad dissatisfaction with Biden amongst certain Democratic groups. Biden's numbers among the youngest voters are really pretty weak, even though the youngest voters are also generally most Democratic demographic.

Biden's also seen declines in approval with non-white voters. Black voters still broadly approve his job performance, but not nearly as high as you'd expect for a Democrat. Latino, Asian-American, those numbers are low. And those groups don't have a high turnout propensity anyway.

The Georgia example, turnout in the runoffs was extremely high. It was within range of presidential level turnout. It may have been that Trump's antics after the election had a mobilizing effect on Democrats than it had a demobilizing effect on Republicans. But with Trump out of the seat, I think it's harder for Democrats to use Trump as a foil for turnout.

Larry Bernstein:

In your book, you discuss midterms of the past, unpopular president's parties have lost 40-60 house seats during the midterms. But today due to the redistricting process, there are so few competitive seats. A 5-point national shift will not flip that many seats.

Kyle Kondik:

There were a lot of landslide seats in past generations. There are fewer competitive seats than there used to be.

There are less competitive states in the Electoral College than there used to be. In years like 1960 and 1976, you had dozens of states where the presidential vote looked very similar to the national vote. A

lot of the big states Texas, California, New York, Florida were competitive. And now, there are many more landslide states.

You do still have big swings in the House. The Republicans picked up 60 seats in 2010. Democrats picked up 40 in 2018. Even if the Republicans have a really big year in 2022, the raw number of net gains won't be as big because they already have 213 seats. Back in 2010, they only were in the 170s, so they had more seats to gain. I wrote recently for our Crystal Ball newsletter, could the Republicans get to their biggest house majority since the Great Depression? Which would be 248 seats.

That would be a 35-seat net gain. That would be a huge landslide, even though the net gain would still be less than in previous years, just because they're starting from a higher point. Although the Democrats have seats that are Biden plus eight but not like overwhelmingly so. And you wonder if there's a Republican mega-wave, those are the seats they would need to flip.

Larry Bernstein:

In perusing the Almanac of American Politics, which is a must for political junkies like me, you can see that there are little to no Republican flip opportunities in the South. All the flip opportunities are in the Mid-Atlantic, Northeast, and Midwest. These are where Biden won districts by just a few points.

Kyle Kondik:

The South you have a deep blue Democratic district surrounded by a bunch of really Republican districts. The Midwest is the most competitive region in American politics. There are districts in Michigan and Pennsylvania that are not as Democratic as they used to be.

When there have been waves, you feel it a little bit more in the Midwest because the region is competitive.

Larry Bernstein:

What are your current predictions for the 2022 midterms?

Kyle Kondik:

If the conditions that we had in November for Virginia and New Jersey are still in place, you'd definitely expect the Republicans to win both the House and the Senate. That's my default position right now. Just because Biden's numbers have been weak for the past several months and they're not showing any signs of getting better.

The Biden approval number is sort of the most important number in looking at these elections. The Republicans only have four real targets in the Senate. And I wouldn't pick them to win all of them at this point, but you'd probably expect them to get two or three. And in the House, probably somewhere in the 20s, in terms of a net gain.

It would put them basically in the 230s in terms of total seats, which is a decent size majority, but not so big that the Democrats couldn't flip it back in 2024.

Larry Bernstein:

The Republicans have to defend Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. Do you think they're at risk of losing either of those senate seats?

Kyle Kondik:

In a year like this, you'd expect the Republicans to hold seats in states that are very competitive. If Trump were still in the White House, the Democrats have a great chance to flip both Wisconsin and Pennsylvania. But the fact that Biden is in the White House changes the dynamic. Arizona, Georgia, and Nevada that Biden won. Nevada was two and a half points, and Georgia and Arizona were less than a point. It wouldn't take much.

Larry Bernstein:

The big story of the 2020 election was changes in political party preferences for the Hispanic voter. Arizona and Nevada have substantial Hispanic voters. Is there a Hispanic realignment going on?

Kyle Kondik:

Working class voters of all stripes are like Nevada that has been narrowly Democratic in the last few elections. I mentioned the importance of white, college-educated suburbanites in places.

Nevada doesn't have super affluent, highly-educated suburban areas like metro Atlanta, or northern Virginia, or Minneapolis. Nevada's a working-class state.

You could see a further erosion for Democrats amongst Latinos and Asian-American voters. Nevada and Arizona are top to the list. Arizona does have a lot of Democratic trending, suburban places around Phoenix. And that's why Biden was able to win the state.

Larry Bernstein:

Do you think Republicans benefit by replacing Trump with DeSantis at the top of the ticket?

Kyle Kondik:

If the Republicans had a new nominee in 2024, that would actually be a great thing for the party because they could keep the Trump Republicans. They'll vote for basically any Republican now. You also have a friendlier voice to appeal to some of the people who the party has lost.

Larry Bernstein:

What if the Republicans run a moderate like Nikki Haley?

Kyle Kondik:

My guess is that there would be some fall off from the people who love Trump more than the Republican party. Polls ask, do you identify more with Trump or with the Republican party? And Trump is the higher number.

Larry Bernstein:

The white female suburban voter in the Midwest, Mid-Atlantic, and Northeast were anti-Trump, and those districts swung Democratic. If Nikki Haley were top of the ticket, would that affect the female suburban white voter?

Kyle Kondik:

I think we can sometimes overstate the importance of identity politics, be it with gender, or race. My guess is that it wouldn't have that big of an effect.

Larry Bernstein:

What is more important the politician or the policies?

Kyle Kondik:

I think it's more party than person.

Larry Bernstein:

What do you mean by that?

Kyle Kondik:

There's a dynamic in American politics called negative partisanship, which means that some people vote more against the other party than for their own.

Larry Bernstein:

I end each session on a note of optimism. Kyle, what are you optimistic about?

Kyle Kondik:

I don't think gerrymandering is the be-all and end-all of politics in the House the way that I think some people do. I do think that there are encouraging signs that there are reform efforts going on that might dull the impact of the practice.

The number of states that are using commissions, or imposing standards on redistricting to take the edge off gerrymandering.

Larry Bernstein:

Kyle, thank you so much.

Kyle Kondik:

Thank you.

