



TRANSCRIPT

Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa

Decoding Campaigns and the Future of American Politics with Lynn Vavreck

In this episode, Fred Lawrence sits down with UCLA Professor of American Politics and Public Policy Lynn Vavreck to explore the evolving landscape of American elections. Drawing from her childhood experiences and decades of research, Vavreck examines how modern data analytics have transformed the study of political campaigns, why traditional television advertising still matters in a digital age, and how a shrinking "movable middle" continues to decide pivotal races. From pervasive public discontent and declining faith in the "American Dream", she addresses where she finds hope for political revitalization and the critical role imaginative leadership can play in moving the country forward.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast episode was generously funded by two anonymous donors. If you would like to support the podcast in similar ways, please contact Hadley Kelly at hkelly@pbk.org. Thanks for listening.

Hello, and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. Since 2018, we've welcomed leading thinkers, visionaries, and artists to our podcast. These individuals have shaped our collective understanding of some of today's most pressing and consequential matters, in addition to sharing stories with us about their scholarly and personal journeys. Many of our guests are Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars who travel the country to our Phi Beta Kappa chapters, where they spend two days on campus and present free lectures. We invite you to attend. For more information about Visiting Scholars' lectures, please visit pbk.org.

Today, I'm delighted to welcome Professor Lynn Vavreck. Professor Vavreck is the Marvin Hoffenberg Professor of American Politics and Public Policy at UCLA. She is a member of the American Academy of

Arts and Sciences, a contributor to *The New York Times*, a recipient of the Andrew F. Carnegie Award in the Humanities and Social Sciences, and the author of six books. At UCLA, she teaches courses on campaigns, elections, public opinion, and the 1960s. She holds a PhD in political science from the University of Rochester and has held previous appointments at Princeton University, Dartmouth College, and the White House. Welcome, Professor.

Lynn Vavreck: Thank you.

Fred Lawrence: We have a lot of things to cover. It always seems like we are in an election year or close to an election year, so I want to talk to you about all that. But before that, I do want to take you back to the roots and what got you started. You grew up outside of Cleveland, right?

Lynn Vavreck: I did, just outside.

Fred Lawrence: Midpark High School, have I got that right?

Lynn Vavreck: That is, in fact, where I went to high school, yes.

Fred Lawrence: So tell us a little bit about your childhood growing up in Ohio, outside of Cleveland.

Lynn Vavreck: Sure. I did grow up just on the west side of Cleveland, and as an only child, spent a lot of time thinking about ways to make connections with people, and so I was always out in town doing something. I'm a huge Browns fan as a consequence of that. If you've ever been to Cleveland or known anyone from Cleveland, the Browns loom very large in the community.

Fred Lawrence: And to be a Browns fan is to be a long-suffering Browns fan, I'm afraid.

Lynn Vavreck: You have to be committed. You have to be committed. So it is still a huge part of my identity. Every Sunday I know exactly what's going on and I'm dialed in. I went through the public schools on the west side of Cleveland, was very involved in music and musical theater, and graduated from Midpark. Midpark no longer exists, as has happened in a lot of places.

It's been merged with another high school in the district. I went off to college in Arizona. I did not grow up in a very political household or a very political community. The way that I became interested in politics is my family, my mom and dad, took me to Mexico. Every couple of years, we went on vacation, and this is the 1970s, the 1980s in Mexico. And we would go, and I would see these campaign posters and campaign signs all up around Mexico, but it was also not lost on me when I looked around that the place looked different than where I grew up.

I noticed right away the poverty, and my parents were a little unusual in this regard. I made friends with some local kids. We went back to the same town every year, and I made friends with some local kids there and really liked, I liked them. And so my parents said it was okay if I went to school with them. And so-

Fred Lawrence: Wow.

Lynn Vavreck: For a couple of days of our vacation, I would go to school with these new local friends, and I noticed that their schools were very different from mine. And so one day I just said to my dad as we were driving around in a taxi, I was probably, I don't know, eight years old and I said, "I see they're having an election. I hope that the people of Mexico can vote for someone who will make things better for them."

And probably without giving it very much thought, my dad, just from the front seat of the taxi, waved his hand to the back seat and said, "Oh, Lynn, it's not a real election." And it just stopped me dead in my tracks. I was like, "What? What do you mean?" And that is one of the ways I became very interested in campaigns and what campaigns were trying to do. I got interested in persuasion and just helping voters make the best choice.

Fred Lawrence: So when you went off to Arizona State University, were you already thinking of political science or government as an area of focus, or did that sort of come along after you got to ASU?

Lynn Vavreck: I had three really deep interests. One was, as I just described, campaigns. I loved the idea of advertising and messaging and persuasion. The other was journalism. I was very interested in political reporting and journalism. And the third was intelligence. I was very interested in doing intelligence work. Another thing that got me interested in politics was, as I mentioned earlier, I was an only child.

One of the ways my parents tried to get me out of the house and with other young people is they sent me to a Saturday day school that was a Ukrainian school in Cleveland, and I went for 13 years to this Ukrainian school, and that really will impress upon a young person the differences between Soviet style government and democracy. And so I was also very interested in helping people of the former Soviet republics thrive in their newly found governments.

Fred Lawrence: Happy to say that Arizona State University is one of our great Phi Beta Kappa chapters and a great success story. My friend Mike Crow, the president out there, has been very supportive of the chapter and has achieved some important work and has done great things at that school, to be sure.

Lynn Vavreck: I love hearing that. He's such an innovator, and I had a great experience there. I was there in the 1980s, so before Arizona State became the thing that everyone thinks it is today. I was there sort of at the very, very beginning of what a different kind of American university looked like.

Fred Lawrence: So when I was preparing for our conversation and reading a lot of your stuff, I'm sure I'm not the first person to say this to you. Of course, I'm drawn back to Theodore White and *The Great Making of the President* series that he started in 1960.

And actually, by the time he's done, he takes it back to '56, the last thing he writes, where he says *The Making of the President, '56 to '80*, a popular trade book that he writes all the way to the end. How do you see yourself vis-à-vis Theodore White? And he's really, I'm not going to say created the field of presidential studies, but he certainly transformed it and he certainly transformed it, for the public imagination.

Lynn Vavreck: Well, he is the pioneer, and everybody who writes a book about an election thinks about those books before they start writing. That's for sure. I think the difference between what my co-authors and I have done is that we are working at a time, we are coming into this in the 21st century at a moment in time when so much data has become available to us, and computing power is enabling us to analyze that data very quickly on our laptops. We don't need to use a mainframe. You know, when I started my Ph.D., it was the mainframe, and you had to get time and...

Fred Lawrence: Right. Computers filled the room, and they made noise, and they had lights that blinked and all sorts of things like that.

Lynn Vavreck: You had to walk halfway across campus to pick up the printout, and God help you if you left out a semicolon in your computer code and had to walk all the way back across campus to rerun it.

Fred Lawrence: Now it's on your laptop, and it's got power that that mainframe didn't have by a factor of 10 or more.

Lynn Vavreck: Exactly. So we're sort of coming at this at this very unique moment in time, and we are doing data-driven analyses. And I would say that's what's a little bit different. There are lots of great journalists who are chronicling elections every cycle. And I like to say they are going to tell you what happened and why candidates made this decision, why they went to that town, and why they did this and that. And we are going to tell you whether those things actually moved any voters.

Fred Lawrence: Let me ask you to help me do my job here for a second.

Lynn Vavreck: Okay.

Fred Lawrence: Phi Beta Kappa has a very strong advocacy orientation with respect to the issues that are core to our mission, academic freedom, free expression, the vitality of research universities, and liberal arts and science education, and we like to think that we are talking to the movable middle, as we say here in Washington DC, people whose minds are somewhat open on this and that we can influence in some way or another by informing them. Is that true, or are we deluded? Have they all signed up for a team, and we're just kidding ourselves that we think they're a movable middle?

Lynn Vavreck: You are not deluded.

Fred Lawrence: Well, I am very relieved to hear that.

Lynn Vavreck: You heard it here first.

Fred Lawrence: Oh.

Lynn Vavreck: There are people who are undecided in elections. There are people who are not wedded to always voting for one side or the other. They pay less attention to politics. They're less interested in it. And one thing about 2026 relative to previous decades: there are fewer of those people than there used to be, but they are deciding elections.

So having a mission that really speaks to the people in the middle who are swinging elections, this is really important right now because, as you said, both sides, I mentioned a moment ago, are homogeneity within the parties, and the people in each party, they are committed to those parties. The other side is too far away for them to entertain a switch to the other side. They want to build two different worlds. So in 2026, that cross-party voting that used to happen was happening less.

We just also happen to be at a moment in time when the size of the two political parties happens to be roughly in balance, and that's what makes this mission of talking to people who are in the middle, a little undecided, a little less interested, but still want to participate in democracy and vote in elections, those people are deciding the outcomes. There's nothing more important than talking to them.

Fred Lawrence: Interesting, because that does swing the difference. You can win 51-49, and you're called the winner, and nobody keeps track afterwards. It was only 51-49, and it is that sliver that possibly makes the difference. I want to talk just a little bit about the M word, money, and money in politics. So I guess-

Lynn Vavreck: I thought you were going to say moderation.

Fred Lawrence: Oh, moderation. Well, that's another M word. I do live in Washington, DC. I'm particularly thinking about some of your work on the role of new media, social media in politics, and TikTok and Instagram. Why is it that money, and the expensive part that we need money for, namely television advertising, why is that still so important?

Lynn Vavreck: Television advertising is still important. I know that this surprises people, but the platforms that you just mentioned, TikTok, Instagram, when candidates use those platforms, they are largely able to target. We can argue about whether they do that well or not well, but they are largely able to identify who they want to serve their advertisements to on those platforms. Television broadcast advertising is very different.

You are catching people, those people we just talked about. The people who are not that interested in politics. They don't pay very much attention, and maybe they're going to vote. Maybe they're not. They're watching Jeopardy or one of the morning shows. And if your ad is in the interstitial periods of those shows, you're catching those people in a way that, when you target ads to groups of people who you know are likely to turn out and turn out for you, you're not getting those people. Now, television advertising is, our results suggest the effects are there.

You don't want to cede the television ground to your opponent. You want to be out-advertising your opponent, but the effects are very small, and they go away very fast. That's why there's so much of it. You can't advertise in October and call it a day if you want to get those small benefits. You may decide that you don't need those small benefits, but the benefits are there. They're very small. They go away very fast.

Fred Lawrence: You've been at this for a long time, studying campaigns and elections, and done a lot of important, influential, insightful work on this. And there's a lot of talk right now about concern with the

state of our democracy. So I'm going to ask you a non-empirical question. Are you hopeful about American democracy?

Lynn Vavreck: Sometimes.

Fred Lawrence: So what makes you hopeful and what keeps you up at night?

Lynn Vavreck: One of the things that I've been thinking about a lot lately is just this general state of malaise or discontent that I sense from American voters. I've been running some questions on the state of the American dream. *The Wall Street Journal* ran a great study in 1986 about the American dream, is it alive and well? And some people, 10%, said the American dream is not alive. I reran those numbers with some colleagues last week, and the share of people who said the American dream is not really alive went up from 10% in 1986 to 43% in 2026.

So that's nearly half the population saying that they do not think the American dream is alive and well, and we could have a longer conversation about what they mean by that. That's just one example of people, as I said earlier, they have lost faith in the government's ability to do anything, to act. Trust in government has been declining since Watergate, but people really don't think the government can do anything. That's different.

I'm interested in this mood, or as the young people would say, this vibe about American politics. I think we've reached such a low that people really want something else. And you see that a little bit in the primary results in 2026, when these longtime incumbents, people have been involved in government for a long time, and voters are saying, "Not you anymore."

Fred Lawrence: Let's do something different.

Lynn Vavreck: "This new person."

Fred Lawrence: Let's try something different.

Lynn Vavreck: Because it can't be worse than.... I think we're approaching this moment where new ideas and new imagination for what it means to run for office, what it means for the government to serve people, all of this is possible.

And that gives me hope that there is an entrepreneurial candidate or a couple of them out there in the Democratic Party, in the Republican Party, who are going to say to themselves right now, because this is when they have to be thinking about it, "How do I win the nomination in 2028 and how do I beat the other side?"

I hope that they're seeing that the answer to that question is not to repeat what we've been playing since 2016. We're really not going back to Joe the Plumber in 2008. So it's really understanding that there's an appetite to pivot, and I hope they have the imagination to come up with what the pivot is.

Fred Lawrence: And that does sound like the seeds of hopefulness. If not hoping in itself, the sort of seeds of it, in the sense of to say, "I'm going to try something different," is very different from, "I give up, and I'm not going to play." That's hopeless.

This is Phi Beta Kappa. Our members are readers, big readers. One of the things I always ask my guests on *Key Conversations* to do is to help us build our bookshelves.

So it's hard for me to imagine anybody listening today doesn't have some background and interest in politics, but still, if you could give us a couple of recommendations for people for whom there's general interest, read the newspapers, but not much beyond that, and then also some people with some real background in this area who would love to take their knowledge to a different level.

Lynn Vavreck: I'm going to give you four books. The first is a 1992 book by Richard Ben Cramer called *What It Takes*. Great book on political campaigns. It's about the 1988 presidential election. It's a commitment, but I think once you get in, it reads like a novel. It's not a novel. It's an actual documentation of that contest. It will tell you a lot about the people who think they can be the leader of the free world. My next recommendation is a book by Josh Green called *The Devil's Bargain*, and that is about Steve Bannon and the rise of the Bannon-Trump Alliance. I would say it's required reading if you want to understand the last 15 years of American politics.

The next one is a 2016 book by a sociologist named Arlie Russell Hochschild called *Strangers in Their Own Land*. And I don't know, to me, this is also required reading to understand the current moment we find ourselves in, especially if you're someone who finds yourself saying, "What are these people thinking?"

And then, the last one is a 2025 book by David Marx called *Blank Space*. This book is really going to push you to think about the current moment we're in. So many people I talk to, they struggle to understand what's happening socially and culturally at this moment, and I think this book does an excellent job of explaining how we got to where we are and why it will be difficult. There's no going back, basically.

Fred Lawrence: I'm so delighted that you're going to be with us as a Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar. I know that you will mean a lot to the campuses you go to. Your enthusiasm for your topic and your erudition in your topic are both exceptional, and I know that will be of great interest in an election year, not in an election year, or at any time in a culture that is dealing with these issues. Thank you so much for joining me today as my guest on *Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa*.

Lynn Vavreck: Thank you so much for having me.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast is produced by Phantom Center Media & Entertainment. Kojin Tashiro is the lead producer and mixed this episode, and Hadley Kelly is the Phi Beta Kappa producer on the show. Our theme song is Back to Back by Yan Perchuk. To learn more about the work of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and our Visiting Scholar program, please visit pbk.org. Thanks for listening. I'm Fred Lawrence. Until next time.

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