

The Power Of Politics

An Interview with David Axelrod, Senior Political Commentator, CNN, and Host, The Axe Files

EDITORS' NOTE David Axelrod is a preeminent American political strategist and commentator and the former chief strategist and senior advisor to President Barack Obama. Axelrod was the founding director of the University of Chicago's non-partisan Institute of Politics and now serves as a senior fellow at the IOP. He is the host of "The Axe Files," a top-rated podcast featuring in-depth conversations with public figures across the political spectrum. A former political writer for the Chicago Tribune, Axelrod produced media strategy and advertising for 150 campaigns across the U.S., culminating in President Obama's historic elections. Axelrod is also the author of The New York Times best-selling memoir, Believer: My Forty Years in Politics.



David Axelrod

Will you discuss your career journey and where you developed your passion for politics?

My story is peculiar in that I had a path from the time I was five years old, and very few people can say that. When I was five years old, John F. Kennedy was campaigning for President in New York City, and it was 12 days before the 1960 election. He came to Stuyvesant Town where I grew up in New York which was a housing development built for returning war veterans. This was one of ten stops that he made in New York that day. The woman who took care of me while my mother was at work, a wonderful lady named Jessie Berry, took me outside and put me on top of a mailbox on 20th Street which had filled in with people, and I watched this transfixing event in which this young man, John F. Kennedy, jumped up on a platform and spoke. Even at this young age, it all seemed very important to me, and I followed him religiously after that. I was introduced to newspapers from the time I learned to read, and while like most kids I read the sports pages first, I was also a news junkie from a very early age.

While I am not sure you will believe me if I told you I remember what JFK said that day at the age of five, I have since researched it and he said that he was not running on the ticket because if he is elected everything will be good, and that being an American citizen in the United States in the 1960s was a hazardous occupation filled with peril, as well as hope,

and this election would be a decision as to which path we wanted to take. These words resonated with me and even as a child it resonated with me that politics had the ability to change the course of history. I worked on my first campaign when I was nine years old handing out leaflets for Bobby Kennedy who was running for the Senate in New York.

What are the characteristics that you look for in a candidate when deciding to get involved in a campaign?

I was a journalist for ten years before I went into politics, and I left journalism to work for a man named Paul Simon – not the singer, but the Congressman – who was running for the Senate in Illinois. It was a hard decision to leave my job as a political writer at the *Chicago Tribune*, but I knew that I wanted to be more of a part of shaping events rather than only writing about events. I knew when I made this change that I had to do it for someone who was authentic and committed to making positive change, and Simon was that person. This

is a quality that I always looked for, although I didn't always find it. I ended up managing Simon's campaign and we won an improbable victory.

I started a political consulting firm after that and through the 150 campaigns I did, I cannot say that all were headed to sainthood, but the longer I became involved the more I searched for people who were authentic and committed to positive change through politics and government. The more experience I gained, the more I became intuitive about working with people who had those qualities. I was attracted to pragmatic idealists like me who understood that you had to make compromises in our politics and in our democracy in order to get positive results.

I will tell you a personal story. I have an adult child, Lauren, who seven months into her life started having seizures that were really uncontrolled for the first two decades of her life, and it really shaped our lives. We were one of the families that almost went poor trying to cover medical and pharmaceutical bills that were not covered by insurance, so when the Affordable Care Act passed and I was working for President Obama at the time, I went into



David Axelrod moderates an election preview panel discussion with Susan Davis, David French, David Wasserman, and Bakari Sellers at the University of Chicago's Institute of Politics



David Axelrod sits down with U.S. Secretary of State Tony Blinken at the University of Chicago's Institute of Politics

my office that night and I wept and wept. I did this not because it was a great political triumph, but because I was thinking of my own family and millions of families like mine that might not have to go through the same agony that we did trying to cover our child's medical bills just to keep her alive. I had known President Obama for many years, and he was an old friend who knew my family situation. When I found the President and told him that I wanted to thank him on behalf of all of those families like mine, he put his hand on my shoulder and said, "that is why we do the work." It was a very simple gesture, but it was so clarifying for me since we get so caught up in the red states and the blue states and who is winning, but that is not the point. The point is what can you do with the authority that you get to make a possible difference in the lives of people, in the lives of communities, and in the life of the world. That is what I sensed as a five year old when I heard JFK and felt that this was a person who may move events in a positive way and while I may not have articulated it at the age of five years old, I knew it was important.

I think the best politicians and the best leaders are those who genuinely care about what they are doing and not just about accumulating power.

Is it harder to find those types of politicians in today's political landscape?

I am concerned that good people are turning away from the process and find it so dispiriting and nasty that they will not engage, but I also feel that there are still many good people who are part of this process and who are joining this process. There are many people from both sides of the aisle who served in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq who have joined this process and are very selfless which is reflected in the commitment that they made to serve in the military.

I meet people all the time in public life, Democrats and Republicans, who I admire. I founded an Institute of Politics at the University of Chicago after my last campaign. It is a non-partisan institute that was created to build pathways to engagement for these really smart young people who want to change the world and are looking for ways to do it. I am also doing some things at Arizona State University. I am inspired by these young people – they are skeptical, but not cynical. They feel a sense of obligation and a responsibility to make their communities better and to make the world better, so that gives me hope.

It is a very difficult environment, and I worry about what social media has done to our society and what it has done to our politics. The business model of the social media platforms is merely to keep people online so that they can see advertising messages, and how they keep them online is not really their concern. The algorithms that they use have this horrendous insight that the best way to keep people online is through anger, resentment, outrage, conspiracy theories, and so on. This drives us into silos – cable TV has had a role in this as well – and we get into this silo where our views are always affirmed, but not always informed, and everyone outside the silo is considered not just a fellow American with a different point of view, but rather a combatant. Politics itself has begun to mirror this, and I am hoping that as citizens and as a society we will push back.

When you look back on your relationship with Barack Obama, did you know early on that he had the ability to connect with people in such a special way and that he may be able to reach the highest office?

There was a friend of mine in Chicago, Betty Lou Saltzman, who's kind of a doyenne of liberal politics. She called me in 1992 and said

that she had just met the most extraordinary man and that I needed to meet him. He had just come back to Chicago from Harvard Law School and was running a voter registration drive. I asked Betty Lou why she wanted me to meet him and she replied, "I know this sounds crazy, but I think he could be the first Black president of the United States." I said that was pretty grandiose, but that I was happy to meet anyone she wanted me to meet. I had lunch with him and while I didn't necessarily walk away humming hail to the chief, it did strike me that here was a guy who had been President of the Harvard Law Review and he could have gone to work at any law firm or any corporation in America and been set for life, but instead he came back to Chicago to run a voter registration drive and went to work in a small civil rights firm. He mentioned to me at that lunch that he wanted to do something larger than himself, and may want to serve in public office one day. I thought that he would be a splendid public official.

It wasn't really until ten years later when we worked together on his campaign for the U.S. Senate that I began to see the things that the country would eventually see – his extraordinary ability not just to speak and communicate, but also to listen. One of the keys to his success as a speaker was his focus on telling the stories of people he met, and his ability to hear people and relate to them was a special trait. He also had the ability to walk into any room anywhere in the country and be comfortable, which is a very unusual quality.

I must say that as highly as I thought of him, and as skilled as I knew he was, I also knew from past presidential campaigns how grueling the process was and how much pressure you come under, and I was not sure how he would react to that. One of the most remarkable traits that Barack Obama has is his growth curve – his intellect is incredible, but his ability to grow was so impressive to me.

When you think back to that day when you were five years old watching JFK speak and the impact that it made on you about the power of politics to give hope and improve people's lives, do you still feel that way today with all of the partisanship and gridlock in Washington DC?

I wrote a memoir a few years ago called *Believer* so it is kind of my brand and I'm not going to quit now. I believe in the power of politics. This is a challenging time, and we have lived through many challenging times – we fought a Civil War in this country – but I always grew up believing that we have the power to make something better and we have the power to change course, and I still believe in that. I have faith that a better day will come, but I also know that this relies on people believing that a better day will come. The battle of democracy is always between cynicism and hope, and while at this moment the cynics are on the march, it is up to us who believe in hope to change that direction. Barack Obama used to say that hope is about believing in things that are unseen – believing that they are possible – and I still have hope. ●